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EDITORIAL

Investment in Information

A society without objective all-around information can be compared to a severely handicapped person, one who is blind, deaf and dumb. Such a comparison may seem somewhat farfetched, and yet, if it doesn't already apply in today's Belarus, it is inexorably headed in that direction. The total control of the state television, the censoring of retransmitted outside telecasts, and the self-censoring of the still existing printed media, result in grave impairment of the society's need to be informed visually.

As an illustration of the effect that even a single TV program can produce, we need only to go back to the last presidential campaign. Both opposition candidates were given two half hour segments each on state television. While both were prerecorded, the first was unfathomably broadcast uncensored. It produced a shock among the population, leading some to ask whether the regime has been overthrown. The following segment, a few days later, was already censored.

By hearing exclusively only one approved point of view on the in-country media, and not being able to hear opposing views, the society can be considered to be hearing impaired. And, finally, being afraid to speak out critically against the regime in print or in public can be viewed as a form of muteness. And small wonder, since the latest criminal code changes define such criticism as a criminal offense. The access to information via the Internet and the limited ability to listen to outside radio broadcasts constitute the minor exceptions to the informational blockade imposed by the regime. To carry the handicapped person/society analogy one step further: the handicapped person is encouraged toward self-sufficiency and independent action, and yet without outside assistance and support he is unlikely to succeed. The same holds true for the handicapped and repressed society, it needs outside help to come out of its bondage.

The civil society in Belarus and its democratic movement has had outside support for years, both from governments, mainly the US, and from private foundation sources. In the recent years, its effectiveness has been greatly reduced, owing to the increasingly repressive measures introduced by the regime. They started with the expulsion of the Minsk Soros' Open Society office shortly after Lukashenka's accession to the presidency. The expulsion of other aid implementation offices followed over the years, forcing them to relocate in neighboring countries, thus making their operation both more cumbersome and limited. This led, in turn, to further cutbacks in outside support, governed in part by an insidious concept of 'limited absorption capability'. So, instead of providing greater support to the development of democracy where the need is greater, such support is reduced, because the existing agencies are less able to do their accustomed tasks. Fortunately, this downward spiral has been reversed through the enactment of the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004. Its reauthorization for the next two years

was introduced in Congress at the end of July, proposing increased support for external radio and television broadcasting.

Last year witnessed the start-up of Belarus-directed media projects in Europe. The European Union has funded a multinational radio, TV and Internet project. Unfortunately its most promising element contracted to RTVi – the Russian international television company – was seriously flawed. The Polish government has revived the former Radio Racja whose FM transmissions are able to cover the immediate border areas of Belarus. It is, nonetheless, a promising start, particularly if the US - funded projects are designed to substantially expand the audience, thus providing a noticeable impulse to democracy building.

Television is the most popular information source. This is true in Belarus as it is around the world. Because of the local control, objective television programming needs to be beamed via satellite. Various conflicting surveys place the number of households with satellite TV receivers between 3 and 10% throughout the country. To overcome this drawback, a successful satellite TV project would have to start by building up the audience, rather than by serving a ready and waiting market. Such a buildup can be the result of increased amount of equipment, as well as of sharply focused programming. Particularly important will be the equipment distribution, subsidized if need be, in the province, where each new set may have an audience of a number of friends and neighbors. The programming should not duplicate what is currently available on the existing stations, but should focus on direct countering of regime's propaganda, exposing the lies and broken promises, the corruption at the highest levels, and showing that life is indeed better in the neighboring democracies.

The expected ongoing funding will need to be greater than what had been dedicated to date for information delivery, but not beyond the amounts proposed for the new Belarus Democracy Act. It will also require changes in the implementation machinery which will need to refocus, rather than continue repeating the less than successful experiences of the past decade.

Internet is the fastest growing information source. The current Internet users represent 10-20% of the population, mainly among the computer savvy younger city dwellers. They are also the ones who are already the best informed. So, instead of providing these people with more and more information, which sometimes is diverse, but mostly duplicated, the stress should be on expanding the provincial Internet base. Substantially increasing the number of the very popular American Corners in public libraries could be one way. Another would be to financially support the direct growth of Internet-connected computer ownership.

Both the satellite TV and the provincial Internet projects will require additional, though manageable, funding. But rather than to view it as an unrecoverable cost, it should be seen as an investment in that hard to come by commodity in Belarus — objective information.

And if access to information can lead a people to freedom, Investment in Information can also be seen as Investment in Freedom!

Walter Stankievich

From the Publisher

The need to continue our support for democracy in Belarus is now even greater. As Europe's last dictator, Alexander Lukashenka not only continues to trample the fundamental rights of his own people, but promotes the establishment of an anti-American coalition with various other repressive leaders.

H.R. 5948 Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006 was introduced in Congress on July 27. The Act promotes democratic development, human rights and the rule of law in Belarus, and encourages the consolidation and strengthening of Belarus' sovereignty and independence. Strives to help put an end to repression and human rights violations in Belarus and to promote that country's entry into a democratic Euro-Atlantic community of nations.

Now it will be up to all of us — who want to see Belarus free and democratic — to work in securing cosponsors for the Act in the House of Representatives.

Contact your Representatives in Congress by e-mail or fax and urge them to cosponsor the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act H.R. 5948.

See site www.Congress.org to locate your Representatives' information by providing your Zip code, and in some instances your full mailing address. Refer to Foreign Policy as the e-mail subject.

Sample text:

Please help bring democracy to Belarus — cosponsor the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act, H.R. 5948 (BDRA)

The need to continue our support for democracy in Belarus is now even greater. The BDRA authorizes material support for the next two years for a variety of democracy-building activities. It also authorizes support for radio and television broadcasting into Belarus, in order to overcome the regime's information blockade. Finally, it supports the imposition of sanctions against the regime, including for all those responsible for fraudulent elections and arrests and imprisonment on trumped-up charges.

The people of Belarus deserve your support in establishing democracy and the rule of law!

QUOTES of QUARTER

"We need to form a great arc of cooperation ... with Venezuela, Republic of South Africa, Malaysia, and certainly, Iran."

President **ALEXANDER LUKASHENKA** in a meeting with the Foreign Minister of Iran in Minsk.

FEATURES

Destroying the Big Lie

By **Ethan S. Burger**

For most foreigners, including journalists, Belarus is an afterthought. It is most often viewed through the prism of Russia. Belarus does not offer corporations a lucrative market and the absence of the rule of law in the country makes it an undesirable candidate for outsourcing (e.g. computer software development). It is not a major tourist destination. Unfortunately, foreign journalists accept as an article of faith that despite his authoritarian rule, Mr. Lukashenka remains popular in the country and would win an open and free presidential election. This does not mean that it is certain that if Belarus were to hold presidential elections that were consistent with international standards that he would be victorious in the first round of voting.

Millions of Soviet citizens cried upon learning of Stalin's death, despite the Gulag. He remains popular among some segments of the population 50 years after Khrushchev's not so "Secret Speech." Joseph Goebbels was able to convince German public opinion in the late 1930s and early 1940s, that Jews and Communists were responsible for all of Germany's problems. The "big lie" concept was that if one reports a statement often enough, it gradually becomes accepted as fact.

After 11 years of Mr. Lukashenka's nearly absolute control over the news reaching the Belarusian people, one questions the value of the opinions they might express. Therefore, polls taken today in Belarus are meaningless if people fear the possible consequences of expressing their opinions to a stranger. If Belarusian nationals were able to speak freely, the polls outcome might be quite different. If Mr. Lukashenka were sufficiently popular not to be concerned about losing power, why has his government taken so many steps to ensure that opposition candidates are unable to mount any semblance of a real political campaign? Why are opposition figures and their supporters harassed? Why was the presidential election moved forward from July to March? Was it to deny the opposition the possibility of organizing? Was it to ensure that it would be difficult to put together massive demonstrations in cold weather? Was it because by scheduling it a week before the Ukrainian legislative elections, the foreign governments would turn to new issues? Did the scheduling of the G-8 Meeting play a role?

There is essentially no independent media in Belarus for a potential challenger to present his proposed program or to criticize existing governmental policies. Why would an individual confident of victory approve the jamming of opposition websites?

Unfortunately, the opposition lacks a charismatic leader behind whom to rally. It needs someone to create a momentum for change. Alexander Milinkevich has shown great personal courage in running for president, or meeting with foreign leaders and officials, and to provide leadership to the demonstrators in October Square. He never harbored

the illusion that he could possibly win at the ballot box. Both Milinkevich and Alexander Kazulin are academics or technocrats. They are not politicians. Perhaps Deputy Chairman of the 13th Supreme Soviet Victor Hanchar, or former Minister of the Interior Yury Zakharanka were such persons, but both were "disappeared" more than five years ago.

It is at best naive to assume that free and fair elections could be held in Belarus as long as Lukashenka remained president of the country. He would have the tools of state power to deploy in any campaign. But for argument sake, let's assume that Belarus was placed under a protectorate (perhaps under either Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the Council of Europe); to ensure that opposition candidates would be competing on a fair playing field. What would be the result?

Many journalists repeat the mantra that Lukashenka has provided the country with stability (at the expense of freedom), that he has ensured that pensions are paid on time (unlike in Russia for many years), there are no "oligarchs" (publicly identified other than Lukashenka) and these factors contribute to his popularity.

If the opposition had the capability of running a serious campaign they could raise questions about how dependent is the economy on Russian subsidies, demand statistics relating to the health of the population, ask why the Hanchar and Zakharanka cases have not been solved, inquire about election fraud in prior elections and referendum, why the standard of living in Poland and the Baltic states is higher than in Belarus, how is it possible that more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that NATO would pose a threat to Belarus, etc.

I would think if the opposition had the opportunity to organize, free of governmental harassment, and had access to the media to get out their message, Mr. Lukashenka could not win re-election. Since the National Assembly is a rubber stamp for Lukashenka and no one serves at senior levels in either the national government or at the oblast level without his blessing, there is no opportunity for day-to-day life to produce candidates through typical mechanisms. Or without the incumbent president seeking re-election, perhaps a Belarusian equivalent of an Andrei Sakharov or Vaclav Havel might emerge.

Is the March 19th election a major defeat for the opposition or a clarion call for future action? Thus the opposition is faced with a dilemma. Mr. Lukashenka probably will not turn over power as a result of his own will. Only time will tell if the recent events will galvanize a more concerted effort to remove him from power. The opposition might pursue a strategy of staging rallies in the hope of provoking an overreaction, and Lukashenka cannot be absolutely certain how his conscripted army will act. Portions of the KGB may prove less loyal to him than commonly believed.

On September 9, 2001, when the final results of the Belarusian Presidential Election were announced shortly after the polls closed, but before I returned to Minsk from the tallying in Slutsk (about 100 kilometers south of Minsk), after the official tally was determined, I began to appreciate

how the results were falsified by means of pre-voting, by the use of "mobile" ballot boxes, allegedly brought to people incapable of coming to the polls, and by simple unnumbered ballot stuffing.

During my time in Minsk (which has almost 20% of the Belarusian population), I did not meet a single person, who did not work for the government, who said they had voted for Lukashenka. And yet, to no one's surprise, he was declared the winner in the city by a landslide.

Since there would be no second round, I decided to leave the country to return home. When I went to the Air Austria/Lufthansa Office, I spoke first in Russian and then in English with the woman at the desk who handled ticket sales. She was in her late 20s. I asked her if she had voted. She said, "why bother?" She also said none of her friends did either.

When I asked why not, she responded, "you foreigners may speak Russian, but you don't understand it. When you see the green posters everywhere that say 'Vybor na prezidenta -- 9 Sentyabr' you think it translates 'Election for President -- September 9 -- thus, nothing seems improper. In fact, however, the poster means 'Election for THE President' (i.e. Lukashenka). Just like Russian speakers often have problems with articles when speaking English, you have problems with Russian."

If the opposition had access to the media to get out their message, Lukashenka could not win re-election

It appears that younger Belarusians are more aware of the outside world than the pensioners. If demographics is indeed destiny, change is only a

matter of time. It remains to be seen whether charismatic opposition figures will emerge. Are Belarusians as complacent as many state with certainty?

I left Minsk to fly to Frankfurt to catch a flight to DC. When I got to the gate, it was announced that the first plane had struck the World Trade Center. Mr. Lukashenka was one of the biggest beneficiaries of 9/11.

(Editor's note: The author has visited Belarus a number of times, besides monitoring the recent presidential election and the previous one in 2001.)

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QUOTES of QUARTER

"I believe it is a mistake to add even more individuals to an already extensive list of politically motivated convictions,"

declared on August 4 **KAREL DE GUCHT**, the Belgian Foreign Minister now serving as OSCE chairman, referring to the conviction of the leaders of Partnership, an organization that planned to monitor the last election.

Recommendations for Future Elections

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR, has released its final report on the Belarusian presidential election, held on 19 March. The report follows a preliminary statement on 20 March, which concluded that **the Belarusian election was severely flawed due to arbitrary use of state power and restrictions on basic rights**. The final report includes a number of recommendations that the ODIHR believes are needed in order for Belarus to bring its elections in line with OSCE commitments.

The recommendations, over 50 in total, regard the legal framework, voting regulations, candidate registration, voter registration, campaign and campaign finance, media, complaints and appeals, voting counting and tabulation of election results and election observation.

The report stresses that a commensurate level of political will is needed for the implementation of the recommendations. "This would require an unequivocal commitment to political pluralism, including respect for fundamental civil and political rights of individuals, such as freedom of expression, association and assembly, in order to fully respect paragraph 6 of the 1990 OSCE Copenhagen Document," says the report.

The report concludes that the conduct of the 2006 presidential election in Belarus failed to meet OSCE Commitments for democratic elections. In particular, paragraphs 5.4, 7.3, 7.4, 7.6, 7.7, 7.8, 10.1, and 10.3 of the 1990 Copenhagen Document were not respected, fully or in part.

Those commitments regard:

- * **a clear separation between the State and political parties;**
- * **guaranteed universal and equal suffrage to adult citizens;**
- * **to ensure that votes are cast by secret ballot, counted and reported honestly;**
- * **respect the right of individuals and groups to establish, in full freedom, their own political parties and provide them with the necessary legal guarantees to enable them to compete with each other on a basis of equal treatment before the law and by the authorities;**
- * **ensure that law and public policy work to permit political campaigning to be conducted in a fair and free atmosphere;**
- * **unimpeded access to the media on a nondiscriminatory basis for all those wishing to participate in the electoral process;**
- * **ensure that individuals are permitted to exercise the right to association**

The OSCE/ODIHR continues to stand ready to support efforts of the Republic of Belarus to conduct elections in line with OSCE commitments and other international standards.

Source: Charter 97 July 6, 2006

Apathy: Rain without Thunder

By Henry W. Johnson

As a student, Mr. Johnson made a few Belarusian friends and became aware of some Belarus related issues. Inspired by the Orange Revolutions events in Ukraine, he decided to play a more visible and proactive role in the struggle for freedom and democracy in Belarus. As the founder of Poglyad (Vision), Henry has helped to organize lobbying efforts and demonstrations. This summer he spent a month in Belarus. This is his story.

At first glance, Belarus would not strike one as a preferred travel destination. In fact, Belarus rarely even bothers to make itself a friendly point of arrival for the West. Though it reciprocates with many CIS countries in payment-free visas, Belarus requires EU and US citizens to pay at least \$100 for entry and then, of course, there are the burdensome bureaucratic necessities of applying for the visa, providing photos, and then obtaining the necessary invitations. Once one enters Belarus, one must register with the police, purchase insurance, make another payment to the National Bank for the aforementioned bureaucratic necessities and then sit in the Minsk passport office waiting to receive a registration card — a process that can take most of a day. At this point most visitors will simply shake their heads and wish that they had chosen a different destination guide from the bookstore shelves. Traveling perils aside, however, Belarus can still serve as an unforgettable destination for the flexible traveler and more importantly, serve as an invaluable insight for any who work with or care about the country, the people and their plight.

Falling into the latter category of traveler, I braced myself against the bureaucratic hurdles and soon found myself in Minsk, at the beginning of what would become my month-long trip around the lesser-traveled provincial regions of the country. My intended goal was to better understand the "mainstream" Belarusian mind frame, who, what, and where of society. Yet what I found to be of even more interest and equal concern was that while Belarusians in Belarus and their contemporaries here in the West are often seen as being "a world apart", those two worlds are too often, and in many ways, one and the same.

In Belarus, there is a widespread disbelief that what is being advertised as democratic ways, could or will improve the situation, and thus the apathy it creates. Specifically, in view of the tremendous economic difficulties that accompanied the immediate post-Soviet period, the years before *perestroika* still look reasonably good to most citizens. This viewpoint, combined with the propaganda successes of the Lukashenka regime and the failures of the political democratic opposition both in the past and during the 2006 Presidential Elections, has only added to the growing tumor of apathy amid the general population. In many of the more rural regions, this apathy is clearly evident by a widely heard rhetorical question, "What benefits me more, sausage or freedom?"

Enter Belarusians in the West. While the arguments here may not be about sausage versus freedom, the conflict, or plain lack of interaction between an apathetic majority of

the diaspora and small groups of visible activists is just as disheartening. Best estimates place the amount of direct immigrants from Belarus to the United States alone at 700,000 individuals, not including those who may have either claimed Russia or Poland as their state of origin, or their direct descendants. Such a sizable, and might I add, free group of Belarusians one would think would be eager to share their freedoms with those back home. Yet during the recent elections, one could only find a few hundred faces of support in places such as Washington, DC and New York City — with a decent amount of these activists not even Belarusian in origin. Perhaps a lack of faith in the election process could be arguably the cause, but when even lesser numbers are visible prior to such major events and at other activities in general, apathy would seem the only logical conclusion.

Unfortunately, apathy seems to be a defining characteristic of Belarus throughout its history, and not so in any way due to some perceptions that Belarusians are averse to democracy. Opposition forces in Belarus have just as strong a commitment to democratic principles as their counterparts in Georgia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet nations. They simply lack the means necessary to convey democratic ideas to their constituency through the thick layers of governmental control at home, and of societal apathy, both at home and abroad. Nationalism, which has served as a vehicle for democracy in other nations, has been swamped by apathy, and has given clear ground to regimes such as Lukashenka's to rule with impunity.

David Marples, one of the few Western scholars studying contemporary Belarusian politics, **once referred to Belarus as a "denationalized nation"** and he has hit very close to the mark. For centuries Belarus' territory served as a battlefield between its more powerful neighbors, Poland and Russia -- with destructive incursions by Sweden and the Cossacks -- finally suffering the devastations of both World Wars. Belarusians managed to preserve their national identity, but had no opportunity to develop modern national institutions. While Ukraine and the Baltics where carving out national statehood, Belarusians were barely able to survive. When Ukrainian intellectuals established Ukrainian nationalism as a part of pan-European movement toward national liberation (partly under a comparatively benevolent Austrian rule in western Ukraine Ed.), Belarusian national discourse was firmly suppressed by the Russian imperial authorities. It was not until Belarus became a constituent Soviet republic that it recovered a semblance of national statehood and set up modern national institutions. The understandable "survival method" as some have referred to it in Belarus, was to fall prey to apathy, and that apathy not only enveloped the majority of Belarusian society, but followed those who left to the West as well.

So it would seem that this is where Belarusians in the West find themselves still in the same world, rather than apart. Indeed, people are always proclaiming they want to create a better future, yet those privileged enough to already be free, seem to be signaling those back home that it's not true. Through their lack of action, the future can be pointed to as an apathetic void of no interest to anyone.

Yes, the past is full of energy, eager to irritate, provoke and insult, tempting them to either bury it, or to repaint it. However, if the only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past, then we have all missed the mark, and that mark brings us right back to apathy.

If the problem is to be solved then, the Belarusian diaspora representatives had best start here, in the West, before they can expect those at home to follow. There is a sizable community in the West, and that entire community is indeed a family. As such, it is high time that Belarusians started acting like one, not focusing so much on opposition or the government as much as on serving the needs of the community, its families, and on bringing them all together. If the community could actually achieve this, then it could begin the long and necessary healing process of figuring out who they are, and where they need to direct the future — directing it for the betterment of the nation and community, rather than for the sake of rewriting the past. Then, and only then, would those of us in the community or involved with Belarus be long on the way to overcoming our own apathy and be able to effectively communicate to the families back home. It will require time, patience, and above all, effort rather than apathy, even in the face of apathy.

Frederick Douglass, an American abolitionist and emancipated slave once spoke on this very issue — of freedom versus inaction. Douglass once stated: "those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; it may be both moral and physical. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will."

True, the time of men such as Frederick Douglass and ourselves is far between, however, his poignant words can and should still serve as a reminder to us today that we can and must do better — not only in Belarus, but here in the West as well, and primarily in combating our own apathy. After all, one cannot expect freedom without action, or the rain without the thunder. **Indeed, it is better to receive the nurturing rain along with occasional lightning and thunder rather than to gradually suffocate under a grey overcast without hope of a ray of sunlight.**

The author is currently pursuing a Masters in International Studies at the American University in Washington, DC, having previously majored in political science.

QUOTES of QUARTER

"Belarus is a free country,"

declared Venezuelan President **HUGO CHAVEZ** in meeting with a Belarusian delegation.

"It is essential that the Western democracies a priori declare that they already do not recognize the referendum (on Belarus-Russia Union),"

opposition leader **ALEXANDER MILINKEVICH** stated regarding his talks with French officials in mid September.

BELARUS' FORUM

Policy "Failure" or Failure of Inaction?

Foreign Minister of Finland, Erkki Tuomioja, who spoke on behalf of the Finnish presidency in the European Union, declared on 13 July that politics of isolation of Belarus pursued by the Union turned out to be counterproductive. "It really helps Lukashenka," declared the official, "they do not care too much about the visa sanctions."

Policy is a failure? Failure it is. But stop: which policy???

Lots of us concerned about Belarus feared after the EU announced sanctions that visa bans and assets freeze will serve for the EU bureaucrats for years to come as a face-saving pretext for doing nothing else about Belarus. We criticized these actions on this blog: not because these are bad, but exactly because they look like a cover-up for avoiding any substantial involvement in democracy promotion in Belarus. Sanctions sound sexy and they quickly capture headlines: so it is very hard to push forward the claim that you really do nothing or too little. Even those sanctions are half-hearted: Mr. Zimouski, the head of Luka-TV, traveled freely to Portugal recently.

What was needed?

To start with, a breakthrough in the information blockade of the political opposition. Here, the EU did some ceremonial and absolutely off-target steps like supporting Deutsche Welle's 15 minutes daily broadcasts and giving money to some Media Consulta to do Belarus programs on Russian satellite RTVI network. There was a lot of comic situations with these media 'projects': the government simply ordered RTVI off the cable networks. Easy! Many journalists, mostly Russians, had absolutely no contacts in Belarus to work with. And DW was best remembered by its initial arrogant attitude towards the Belarusian language and the wave of protests raised by its decision to broadcast in Russian exclusively. Afterwards, one wondered who listens to it... Obviously, not because Vitali Silitski called for boycott...

What else: Latvia helped with arranging free visas: a small but important sign that Europe cares. But this was not supported by anybody.

The only truly good thing that came up was helping students who were expelled for political reasons to get an opportunity to study abroad. Otherwise... very little.

I don't want to sound like "give us more, give us more!" I understand that the EU options are limited and the Union as any other democracy promotion agent relies heavily on the troops on the ground, and the opposition following the March events was remarkably passive. But it does not mean at all that EU had "policy" that it "isolated" Lukashenka and that this "policy" "failed". The real failure is the absence of policy, absence of effort, both at home and abroad.

At least, Mr. Tuomioja confirmed that the course: isolating the regime and helping civil society, will be continued. This is a good general approach that never was filled with

much substance. Also, it will be absurd to wait for results in few months and even in couple of years: the effort to bring the democracy in Belarus is obviously a long-term one.

But the problem is that framing the issue as "failure of policy" rather than "failure of inaction" promotes the idea that was tried numerous times before and always failed miserably: a "dialogue" with Lukashenka. I am not against dialogue. Talk if you can. The problem, however, is that this "dialogue" will once again replace efforts to promote democracy. Moreover, the EU will once again fall into trap. How can Mr. Lukashenka show to the world that he is worth dealing with? Very simple: grab three dozens most active opposition leaders and dissidents, then release 15 to some round of negotiations, and show that you are moving into the 'right direction.' Europeans will be elated! But this is how the 'dialogue' will assist in deepening repressions in Belarus. And if happens, it will be on the consciousness of those who advocate this "dialogue."

Inaction of the EU frustrates. Not in the least since Belarusians have to argue, argue, explain for thousand times the obvious things. Mr. Milinkevich is stuck in Europe not only because he likes travelling, but also because the smallest thing, like getting fellowships for students, requires gigantic efforts and lots of bureaucratic gates to pass. Then someone like Dutch MP Jan Marius Viersma tells Milinkevich another obvious thing: that spending too much time in the EU does not help to connect to ordinary Belarusians too much. I agree. But the problem is that it is you who invite Belarusians all the time, and when they come, you first confirm in front of the media, that you are 'concerned,' 'committed', etc., and then, privately, there is always a bunch of bureaucrats who say "this is too difficult" or "we cannot do much." Then comes another invitation...

So, help deprive Belarusian opposition leaders of the frequent opportunities to travel to the EU. Get a sound policy towards Belarus and let's start working together. At last...

Author: VW

Source: Transitions Online Belarus Country Blog,
July 20, 2006

QUOTES of QUARTER

"US will not recognize the results of a referendum on the formation of the Belarus-Russia Union,"

said Ambassador **GEORGE KROL** in Minsk on July 16, basing his remark on statements issued by State Department spokesmen.

"One thing I know for certain, Putin will leave (the presidency). Otherwise he'll become an isolated and untouchable President, just like the last tyrant of Europe – Lukashenka,"

ALEKSEI MUKHIN, the head of Russia's Center for Political Information, responding to a journalist's question.

Belarusians in Europe

I'm impressed by the capability of sport, especially football, to help a country to get recognition..

Vitali Kutuzau (Kutuzov) is one of so-called "Europeans" in our national football team. He was snapped by AC Milan, and while not having played too much for this famous club, he has played in some other European clubs since.

In 2003-2004 he had a spell in U.S. Avellino, an Italian Serie B/Serie C1 club (actually jumping between two divisions almost each year). Not every supporter of the Belarusian national team is able to remember this fact... But fans there in Avellino still remember it! Some of them (especially younger ones) learned about existence of Belarus and its geographic location just because they had Kutuzau on their roster. He was playing for the club for a year only, being just one of the strikers, not a recordbreaker; it was more than two years ago, but Avellino fans still remember him and today he was again mentioned on one of Avellino forums. They follow him and his every goal in the Belarusian national team's jersey.

It should sound strange to most Belarusians... Do Belarusian football supporters remember foreign players who played for local clubs few years ago? Do they follow them? I don't think so... I shouldn't even mention that no Belarusian club of second or lower division has an official website, and unofficial ones are not numerous yet.

Thanks to Kutuzau, now I know at least one town in Italy where Belarusians will be especially welcome - Avellino.

Source: TOL Belarus Country Blogs. **Author:** BM

SPORTS

Belarusians Placed 3rd in European Track-and-Field Championships

Göteborg, Sweden — In the European championships, held in August 2006, Belarusian athletes won 4 gold, 3 silver and 2 bronze medals, placing third behind the powerful Russian and German squads.

Three days after Ryta Turava won the 20km walk, her sister Alesia triumphed in the inaugural women's 3,000 metres steeplechase.

Ryta Turava said after her winning walk that Alesia must now match her achievement, and the former world record holder duly delivered - running away from her rivals to win in 9 minutes 26.05 seconds.

World indoor champion Natalla Kharanika won the women's shot put with 19.43m in a tight battle with compatriot world outdoor champion Nadzeya Astapchuk, who was just 1 cm off with 19.42m.

Uladzimir Mikhnievich placed second in men's shotput with 21.11 m.

The two-time world champion Ivan Tsikhan took the gold in men's hammer throw with 81.11m, edging Finland's Olli-Pekka Karjalainen (80.84m) and Vadzim Dziewiatouski of Belarus (80.76m).

On the last day of competition Belarusian women won a silver medal in a 4x400 m. relay race (3 minutes, 27.69 seconds), and a bronze in 4x100m. (43.61 seconds)

ECONOMY

A Refined Regime

By Siarhej Karol

Belarus now pumps large quantities of oil to the EU. What does this mean for the economy and the prospects for democratization?

Belarus as a trade-based economy oriented towards Europe sounds like a vision of Belarus' embattled opposition politicians - but in fact, this is the picture that emerges from European Union trade statistics. With over half of its exports going to Europe and billions of euros in revenue and profits flowing back, Belarus appears to be in far better shape today than just three years ago, when its outdated goods could not compete even in Russia. So what happened in the last few years?

A EUROPEAN ECONOMY?

In 2003, the \$32 million of exports from Belarus to the United Kingdom could be disregarded as a rounding error. But just two years later Britain imported goods worth 12 times as much, and is on track to exceed \$700 million in 2006. As an exporter to the U.K., Belarus is now ahead of Ukraine.

In the greater EU, the picture is the same: between 2003 and 2005, exports from Belarus to the 25 current member states increased by 70 percent and amounted to 3.3 billion euros last year. Where less than 20 percent of Belarusian exports went to the EU just three years ago, this share has now grown to over 50 percent.

This is a remarkable transformation, and even more remarkable is how little it's been noticed. But there's a simple explanation: the increase is due entirely to changes in the global energy markets. The annual average price of oil doubled between 2003 and 2005, while exports of petroleum products from Belarus to Europe increased by a factor of 2.7, outpacing the mere price effect.

The increase in Belarus' petroleum exports was the result of a deliberate policy by the government of Belarus to use Soviet-era refineries in Mazyr and Novapolatsk to refine Russian oil and sell it to the West. The refineries, whose capacity far exceeds the domestic needs of Belarus, were designed as part of the Soviet energy strategy in the 1970s.

Back then, rising oil prices prolonged the life of the moribund Soviet economy by a decade. President Lukashenka clearly hopes for a similar effect on his regime.

The Brezhnev-era factories were put back to work and the volume of petroleum pumped to Europe rose by 37 percent in just two years. The share of fuels in the total trade flow to Europe rose from 36 to 56 percent. The money earned accounts for more than 15 percent of the total national product.

Just as in a Middle East oil state, Belarus' prosperity is now built on oil.

AN OIL BOOM SPONSORED BY THE NEIGHBOR

But unlike most other oil states, Belarus does not have its own mineral deposits; rather, it refines the crude it gets from Russia. Oil constitutes roughly 40 percent of Belarusian exports; it also constitutes about 40 percent of Belarusian imports.

The country's economy has become a pipeline with a refinery on top.

Refining other people's oil is not a bad business, especially at a time when global refining capacities cannot meet demand, as is currently the case. But it normally does not yield the sort of profit that Belarus is now realizing. From 2003 to 2005, the difference between the market price for Russian crude and the price paid for it by the Belarusian refineries was between 35 and 45 percent, according to Belarusian government statistics quoted by Jaroslav Romanchuk of the opposition United Civic Party. Other observers quote similar margins.

This difference allows Belarusian refineries to make around \$10 profit per barrel, after accounting for the unprofitable domestic oil consumption. (For comparison, the European refining industry, which does not have access to discounted Russian crude, was losing about \$4 per barrel in 2005.) This is a fantastic profit: Russia itself makes less money on extraction than it allows Belarus to make on refining.

This lucrative trade now generates profits of some \$1 billion for Belarus every year.

In a country personally run by the president, it is all too obvious where these profits go: the national library building, the celebrations for the national holiday on 3 July, armored vehicles for the police.

The transformation of Belarus into an oil state would not have been possible without changes in Russia. In fact, it is another aspect of a dramatic transformation that has occurred in Belarus' mighty neighbor to the east since 2003.

A few years ago, the direct integration of the Belarusian economy into that of Russia would not have been possible. Oligarchic, chaotic, and corrupt as it may have been, Russia was nevertheless a market not controlled by the state. Today, things are very different. Still operating on market principles, engaging foreign capital, and participating in global economic clubs, Russia has re-established the central role of the state in economic management. Its leadership is pursuing a deliberate strategy of creating a powerful but state-centric domestic economy built around energy assets.

Having rationalized and partly renationalized its energy industry, the Kremlin created a system of large core enterprises run by current or former government officials and personal allies of President Putin. In this new emerging Russia Inc., Belarus Inc. is a small subsidiary that is allowed to refine some of the Russian oil in order to sustain its otherwise stagnant Soviet industries.

Meanwhile, just as Russia has increased the role of the state in its economy, Lukashenka is allowing a greater role

for the market in his. Unlike Putin, he does not have to appoint his people to key management posts – no serious business has ever been possible in Belarus without an affiliation with the president's apparatus. In the end, the two countries' systems are converging, and this, just as Belarus' reliance on oil, has clear political implications.

WHAT IT ALL MEANS

First, the Belarusian opposition has to accept that its traditional economic message that the regime has failed the economy is not going to work when billions of euros are flowing into the country. The non-oil economy is deteriorating fast, but it is being sustained by redistribution of oil profits. Paid as salaries or given as holidays, subsidies continue to make things look normal in regular workers' eyes. The opposition needs a different message. The electoral speeches by opposition leader Alyaksandr Kozulin, now in jail, may provide a useful template: rather than try to convince his audiences that the economy was stagnating, he talked of how the benefits of the so-called economic miracle had not trickled down to ordinary workers even while the lifestyle of Belarus' pro-Lukashenka elite was taking on a sheikh-like flavor.

Second, Europe is now Belarus' main trading partner, which means that it has vastly more influence than commonly thought. Europe has far more influence on Belarus than on Russia, on whose energy Europe is critically dependent. Even though Europe buys fuel from Belarus, it does not depend on it, since anyone can refine oil but only a few countries actually have it. Even though large for Belarus, its fuel imports to Europe are only three percent of those from Russia and can easily be replaced by other refiners.

Direct hard sanctions against Belarus, or at least its fuel export industry, would be extremely effective. However, they would also be difficult to implement given the collateral damage, and

the propaganda opportunities for Lukashenka, that they would cause. But the mere threat of sanctions, and pointed public references to Belarus' dependence on Europe, could have some influence, and there are certainly no limitations on public campaigns of opposition activists against the European energy companies that trade with the dictator. In the age of the global brand, grassroots pressure on companies can have dramatic effects.

Finally, there is always the possibility that Belarus could fully converge with Russia in a model combining political authoritarianism with economic modernization. Should this happen, the chances of changing the political regime in Belarus in the foreseeable future would virtually disappear. If the temporary oil windfall can be translated into a more sustainable, more modern, and more open economy built for the future, most Belarusians are likely to follow the example of Malaysians, Koreans, and Chinese who at various points of time happily traded large amounts of political freedom for a certain amount of economic well-being.

Source: Transitions On Line, 27 July 2006.

Belarus' prosperity is now built on (cheap) foreign oil.

Seven Russian Challenges to The West's Energy Security

By Vladimir Socor

(Editor's note: The topic applies to Belarus very directly, since its economy is greatly dependent on the pricing of gas and oil delivered from Russia and carried west in part by Belarusian pipelines.)

Russia's challenge to Western energy security has grown almost explosively in recent months along seven dimensions:

1. Seemingly unchecked growth of the European market share captured by Russia's state-connected energy companies. Largely driven or assisted by the Kremlin, this process is fraught with manifold economic and political risks to Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community.

2. Moscow's ability to manipulate the flow of supplies en route to recipient countries. This ability was demonstrated during Ukraine's gas crisis of January-February 2006, with ripple effects on European countries farther downstream. In July of this year, Moscow cut off the oil supplies to Lithuania and also blocked oil supplies from Kazakhstan to that country, so as to thwart the sale of Lithuania's refinery and oil-transport system to Poland's PKN Orlen. (It also continues to block Kazakhstan's access to Latvia's Ventspils oil terminal.) Under the guise of commercial and debt arrangements, in Ukraine's case, and technical problems, in Lithuania's case, Moscow plans to set the stage for takeovers of Ukraine's gas pipelines and Lithuania's oil sector.

3. Disruption of energy export flows even before they leave Russian territory. Thus, in January and February this year, below-average winter temperatures in Russia (certainly not an unpredictable occurrence) reduced the gas volume available for Europe. A well-organized although never-explained sabotage of three energy supply lines on a single day (January 22) in Russia's North Caucasus had a devastating impact on Western-oriented Georgia, with collateral effects on Moscow's ally Armenia. And a relatively minor oil spill from a pipeline in western Russia in July provided the excuse for cutting off supplies to Lithuania (though not to Belarus from the same spur).

4. Moscow's monopoly on the transit of eastern Caspian oil and gas to consumer markets in the industrialized democracies. The transit monopoly constitutes a novel type of economic and political leverage, usable against producer countries as well as against consumer countries. It is also an instrument of choice in the economic and political penetration of the countries of Europe's East. The South Caucasus-Black Sea transit corridor is the only option that can protect the interests of consumer and producer countries alike.

5. Rapid inroads by Russian state-connected energy companies, particularly Gazprom, into downstream infrastructure and distribution systems in Europe. Such arrangements include long-term exclusive contracts to lock Russian companies in and lock competitors out, leading

eventually to price dictation and political leverage on consumer countries. In the case of gas, the success of Moscow's strategy significantly depends on control over Central Asia's gas reserves. Moscow uses a mix of political pressure and corruption to foil the construction of trans-Caspian oil and gas pipelines via the Black Sea region to Europe.

6. Inroads into some of Europe's traditional supply sources of oil and gas, such as Algeria and Libya. In Algeria's case, Russia has successfully offered multibillion-dollar arms deliveries as well as debt write-offs in return for starting "joint" extraction projects in Algeria and "joint" marketing of the fuel in Europe. With Europe no longer in full control of its few remaining oil and gas provinces, it must refocus its attention toward Caspian-Black Sea energy transit

7. An incipient, yet already massive, transfer of financial resources from Western capital markets to fund extractive projects in Russia that operate under discretionary control of Russian state-connected companies and the Kremlin. Thus, the initial public offerings just held "successfully" in London for Rosneft and Gazprom have opened a drain on Western financial markets toward Russia, discounting considerations of energy security, let alone common policies on energy or foreign policy altogether.

To this succinct enumeration of recent challenges one must add the collateral political damage in some European countries from non-transparent, monopolistic agreements with Kremlin-linked companies. Gazprom's massive entry into Turkey, Austria, Italy, and Germany, for example, has involved certain top-level politicians, business figures, and banks and brought them into highly questionable arrangements. These include protecting Gazprom against competition from other supply sources, such as those from the Caspian-Black Sea region, on European markets.

The convergence of these trends has highlighted the long-neglected, but now rapidly mounting, risks to the energy security of the enlarged West and its partners in Europe's East. At last, Brussels and Washington are beginning to acknowledge some aspects of this manifold challenge. But they have yet to focus on the dangerous nexus now forming between disruptions by Russia or in Russia and growing dependence upon Russia.

Source: Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 6, 2006 . Volume 3, Issue 163, published by Jamestown Foundation.

QUOTES of QUARTER

"If our entrepreneurs were to follow our laws – they would simply cease to exist,"

said one time Belarusian entrepreneur **LEU MARHOLIN**, commenting on the latest World Bank report on Belarus.

"The construction of a nuclear plant (in Belarus) is an important factor in ensuring energy security,"

President **ALEXANDER LUKASHENKA** in addressing Belarusian diplomats who convened in Minsk on August 1.

Lu Ka Shen and Singaporization Of Belarus

In its short life, the economy of independent Belarus has always been in a state of emergency - saving Soviet citizens employed in the Soviet industry from a Russia style impoverishment has been the main goal of president Lukashenka's policies. Designed after World War II as an assembly line of the Soviet Union (an internal manufacturing outsourcing of sorts), the industrial complex of the then BSSR was built to put together products using energy and inputs from other, often distant, parts of the USSR. Within the Union, it was not an export economy, but when the Soviet Union collapsed, Belarus became one of the most trade dependent economies in the world. Exports amount to about half of Belarusian GDP. By comparison, the famous export oriented economies, Japan and Korea at the peak of their growth, did not exceed 40%, and even China is below Belarus in this regard.

This means that the employment and income in the country depend on the foreign market conditions, and to Belarus they have been particularly unfavorable. In the world suddenly open to fancy foreign products, goods made by the inefficient Belarusian factories became both expensive and of poor quality. But Lukashenka managed. As a crisis manager, he struck deals with the Russian government for barter supplies of Soviet products made in Belarus, in exchange for gas and oil. As trade negotiator, in order to make Belarusian exports relatively more attractive, he agreed on a customs union with Russia. As a salesman, he toured around the former USSR, Iran, Iraq, and Libya selling everything that could be moved, from tractors to weapons. It worked, but just barely, and by 2003 the economic disadvantage was so obvious as to make his government seek monetary union with Russia.

Then came the energy shock, the price of oil went up, and the old Soviet refineries in Belarus began turning Russian oil into European diesel, with a huge discount received from Russia. They even installed a new machine in Navapolatsk, that makes clean diesel to European specifications. This gave the Lukashenka economy, which is basically one state-owned company of which he is the chief executive, a new breath of life.

That was huge and unexpected luck that could carry the regime for a few more years without reforms, but the need for them is clear even to the government. And should Russia cancel the discount, the oil profits will evaporate faster than diesel fumes, and the government will be left without funds to pay the next three month of salaries.

It is clear that the regime is looking for a way out, a solution that would enable development and modernization without giving up political controls, a "Singaporization" of Belarus. Lee Kwan Yu, prime minister of Singapore that just emerged from British colonial status in the 1940s, ruled the country for over thirty years, created a pocket parliament, shut down independent press and kept a few opponents in jail. He even installed his son as the successor, before democracy gradually took hold in the country. Singapore was very much like Belarus — a

newly independent state without its own resources, small, homogenous and submissive to authority. It even looked like Belarus - centrally managed and artificially clean - a place where the ruler cared about garbage on city streets and the color of the buildings. But during the years of dictatorship, Singapore enjoyed incredible economic growth, with income per person overtaking Britain by the 1980's, turning first into industrial and then scientific economy. Prosperity was dearer to its citizens, and Western businessmen, providing billions of capital and trade, did not mind the occasion human rights abuse and the lack of democracy.

Lee Kwan Yu's economic policy consisted of three parts - state ownership and management of strategic assets, freedom given to local entrepreneurs in small and medium sector, and guarantees to foreign investors of their property rights. Can the same be done in Belarus? The first component is certainly in place - Belarusian enterprises are already owned by the state in what amounts to a holding company that, with some adjustments, could look something like Temasek, the Singaporean government's strategic investment firm. The other two parts are harder to achieve. President Lukashenka's hatred for private entrepreneurs and especially Western investors is genuine and genetic. On the one hand, he wants foreign capital and technology, desperately needed to modernize the economy sustained by cheap oil and gas. On the other hand, he fears that the foreigners will loot the country (he sincerely doesn't get it that there is nothing to loot). As any average Soviet manager, he thinks that the economy is a zero sum gain - if you win, then I must lose, there cannot be two winners.

But what if Lukashenka too will learn that the economic modernization could coexist with political oppression? With a little brainpower, the current oil windfall could become an initial source of funds and integration with the West serving as start of the Singaporization of Belarus. Will the West accept such a proposition from Lu Ka Shen as it did once from Lee Kwan Yu?

Siarhei

Source: Transitions Online Belarus Country Blog, August 3, 2006.

QUOTES of QUARTER

"The Venezuelan government is interested in the development of nuclear energy for peaceful uses, ...plans to call for support for Iran's nuclear research," stated Venezuela's President HUGO CHAVEZ at the conference of the Non-aligned Movement in Havana on September 15.

"Belarus will never pay more for gas than Germany," "(After all) the people who fought together with Russians (in WWII) are still alive."

declared President **ALEXANDER LUKASHENKA** in Pinsk on September 1.

Thoughts and Observations

The End of The Velvet Dictatorship

By Max Shchur

For a long time Lukashenka's regime benefited from the false feeling of its own security. Bolstered by its own propaganda, the regime convinced itself that it enjoys popular support and is not threatened by anything. Then came the mistake of allowing the presidential candidates to appear on state television without censoring their speeches. A few minutes on the TV screen changed the country's atmosphere and the distribution of strength. According to the propaganda machine, the entire country was suddenly full of terrorists and Western agents. For the first time in twelve years it became evident that the regime's repressions are basic and widespread. Earlier comparisons with Fidel Castro seemed exaggerated — now they were confirmed as fact. It became apparent that in degree of societal control, the Lukashenka dictatorship nearly equaled the measures used under Soviet Stalinism -- until recently there was simply no need to use them.

On one hand, Lukashenka himself made it understood that he will go to any lengths to defend the western outpost of Russia. It is apparent that even the prospect of a Tiananmen Square does not scare him as much as the prospect of losing power. He personally nurtured the foundations of this power: feelings of general passivity, hopelessness, fear of tomorrow, and belief in the perceived foreign threat. These personally felt perceptions Lukashenka has strived to nurture in the population. On the other hand, in literally a few minutes of the opposition candidates TV speech, it became apparent that Lukashenka's "united nation," and the "social state" with its Soviet values, namely the marginalization of the outspoken minority and reduction of the majority to a zombie-like state, is a colossus on clay feet.

The image of the People's President threatens to quickly fall apart with Lukashenka losing the love of his subjects, so necessary for every czar's rule. Without the illusion of this love the dictator will be paralyzed — looking into the mirror of people's judgment of him, he will see his own caricature. This, in turn, means that in the eyes of those in his close circle he will stop being the man in control of the country. And then, sooner or later, they are bound to get rid of him. Replacing him will signify the end of the personal dictator model in Belarus. French philosopher Michel Foucault, when analyzing the mechanisms of absolute power in a monarchy, wrote that such power is based not so much on violence, as on the threat of using violence against the subjects in the event of their of insubordination to the law. It is the awareness of this threat that keeps the subjects subordinated. However, as soon as the trump of violence has been used, this blackmail by fear loses its power. The authority has been used up and is then deprived of its symbolic might.

It is precisely this mechanism that will be effective in the process of the final delegitimization of Lukashenka's rule. Thus, when the violence that was previously applied to the vocal opposition, will affect broad masses of society, the arguments for the legality of this violence will not work anymore. This will be more evident when the violence assumes really draconic dimensions, since the Internet will make it impossible to claim that it is a fight against a "handful of people's enemies." Sooner or later it will become apparent that this handful is fighting on the side of the people, ultimately involving the majority.

This is why Lukashenka instinctively fears what he calls "provocations by the opposition." He knows that he cannot afford to crank up repressions as much as he would like to. And although the opposition constantly declares that it has no need for violence, Lukashenka understands that it is inevitable. This is why he is preparing the society in advance for such violence, while at the same time attempting to legitimize it by blaming that "handful of enemies," instructed and paid by the West. He is ready to use any means to fight them in order to prevent their gaining in numbers and strength.

Although he has so far managed to stay a step ahead of the moderate opposition, he is making a mistake by underestimating his adversary. He really thinks of the opposition as morons and idiots. The evidence against them is then fabricated to conform with these views. He does not understand that this adversary is guided by something greater and more universal than just desire for power. Lukashenka refuses to admit to himself that as persons his opponents are much more sophisticated, cultivated and complex, than he. And although he admits his own limits as a leader and a human being, he, at the same time, jealously hates everyone who might be superior to him. Yet, in his effort to retain the status quo, Lukashenka is gradually and inevitably becoming ridiculous -- he does not understand, or refuses to understand that it is impossible to bring the whole nation down to his own intellectual level -- something that was probably possible back on his collective farm.

The people may be intimidated, deceived, and brutalized, but to force them to love and respect Lukashenka is impossible, just as it is impossible to force the rape victim to love the rapist. Today, to preserve the illusion of the people's love, no means are spared. Revenge is taken against his former supporters, and now his most vocal opponents, such as the five year prison term handed down to opposition candidate Alexander Kazulin, for, among other misdeeds, smashing Lukashenka's portrait -- the current national icon. While this destruction of the icon was initiated on the national stage by Kazulin, it will soon be completed by Lukashenka himself. His prolonged stormy romance with the Belarusian people is ending — and he knows it.

Source: Belarusian-language Web site <http://www.niamiesta.net/>. Translated by George Stankevich.

Max Shchur has been a resident of Prague since 1998. He writes Belarusian prose and poetry, and translates from Spanish and other languages. In 2004 he was awarded the Krecheuski Foundation's Juchnaviec prize for his novel "Tam, dzie nas niamia." (A place, where we are absent). Since 2003 he has maintained a literary Web site www.niamiesta.net/ (The invisible city).

How Secure Is Lukashenka?

By David Marples

Having attained through dubious means another overwhelming election victory last March, and having amended the Belarusian constitution yet again so that there are no limits to his term in office, President Alexander Lukashenka appears to be more firmly in power than ever before. Yet there is evidence to suggest that the so-called last dictator of Europe feels far from secure. He is seeking new friends and persecuting enemies, and his overriding mission is supposedly a foreign policy to create a multi-polar world that ultimately will succeed in developing a power base that can oppose the United States.

This situation was illustrated by the recent visit of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Minsk on July 23-25. The two leaders had already exchanged complimentary greetings earlier in the month on the official public anniversaries of the two states (July 3 and 5). Then Chavez arrived in Minsk, reportedly on the invitation of Lukashenka (although his subsequent visit to Russia casts some doubt on this statement) and the two presidents lavished praise on each other and their respective governments. Annual trade turnover between the two states is around \$15.56 million, so, despite official rhetoric, the two countries are hardly essential to each other. But they both denounced "Western pressure" against their countries, allegedly intended to force them into adopting "an alien ideology" and "pseudo-economic reforms."

Earlier in the month, at a workshop organized by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Russia and Belarus, Defense Minister Leonid Maltsau outlined the perspective from official Minsk. Both the United States and the European Union, he asserted, are elaborating various options for creating crises in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, with the goal of incorporating the countries into their own "system of global rule" and undermining prospects for integration within the CIS model. After the partial success of democratic "color revolutions" in some former Soviet countries, he claimed, the West wishes to build a "Baltic-Black Sea belt" around Russia. Thus far it has been unsuccessful because of the intransigence of Belarus. Therefore the West would like to see a change of regime in Belarus and the permanent committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly has demanded a repeat of the March 26 elections. Belarus has responded to this pressure by improving its military cooperation with Russia and seeking to improve further the potential of the "Belarusian-Russian" regional group of forces.

Why would the Minsk regime make constant references to such pressure if Lukashenka truly felt secure? Domestically, the petty and vindictive persecution of real and alleged opponents has continued without abatement. Following the savage jail sentence imposed on presidential candidate Alexander Kazulin, the authorities briefly detained democratic opposition leader Alexander Milinkevich, and, in a ludicrous miscarriage of justice, arrested United Civic Party chairman Anatol Lyabedzka on July 17 and impris-

oned him for ten days on the grounds that he swore in a public place! Meanwhile the trial of the unregistered civic initiative "Partnerstva," which has tried to monitor elections in Belarus, began on July 28 behind closed doors, with Judge Leanid Yasinavich presiding. The leaders of the initiative have been in detention since last February. One of the few remaining independent newspapers, *Khimik* (Navapolatsk), suspended publication in early July citing financial problems, while another, *Komsomolskaya pravda v Belorussii*, faces a criminal case and potential libel charges of \$467,000 for its July 11 article about the personal finances of Hryhory Kisel, the head of the government's ONT television station.

In what ways does the Lukashenka regime feel threatened? The United States and the EU have imposed a travel ban on the president and his leading associates, and they have frozen their foreign bank accounts (if such exist). In late July, Congressman Christopher Smith (R-NJ) proposed the renewal of the Belarusian Democracy Act, originally signed into law by President George W. Bush in October 2004. The bill would authorize \$20 million in assistance for each of the years 2007 and 2008 for NGOs, youth groups, independent media, and democratic political parties, and a further \$7.5 million for the same two years for the creation of surrogate TV and radio broadcasts to the people of Belarus. Such measures might keep the opposition afloat, but they do not directly threaten the tenure of Lukashenka. Rather they are a sign that the United States fails to see any improvement in the harsh internal environment in Belarus.

As for the implicit foreign policy mission to create a new power bloc, it is surely a lost cause. The Russia-Belarus Union, if and when it materializes in full, would be of more benefit to the geostrategic interests of Russia than Belarus. Lukashenka has few friends elsewhere, which is why Chavez was made so welcome. Isolation both in the world and in office perhaps breeds fear and paranoia. On the other hand, exaggerated foreign threats are also calculated to maintain an atmosphere of trepidation within Belarus, and the perpetuation of the image of a small, successful country surrounded by states intent on overthrowing the Minsk regime. In reality, there are no discernible external threats to the Lukashenka regime and for the moment the internal ones have subsided.

Sources: Eurasia Daily Monitor, August 2, 2006, (*Belarusy i rynok*, July 24; *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, July 25; *Narodnaya volya*, July 26; *BelaPAN*, July 5, 23, and 25; *Belorusskie novosti*, July 25; and *Charter 97*, July 31)

QUOTES of QUARTER

"Dictators fall only when people fill the streets. We are capable of that and we'll win",

opposition leader **ALEXANDER MILINKEVICH** at the Great Jeans Festival in Minsk on September 16.

"Belarusians have realized their identity and do not want to join Russia",

SERGEI STEPASHIN, the head of Russia's Chamber of Accounts in an interview with *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, June 5, 2006.

Trial of Election Monitoring Activists

A verdict was handed down on August 4 in the closed-door trial of four Belarusian activists accused of running an unregistered organization. The four, who have been in pretrial detention since February, each received prison sentences ranging from six months to two years. The four worked for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that was planning to monitor the March 19 presidential election. The sentences handed down by Judge Leanid Yasinovich were more lenient than those recommended by the prosecution -- but harsh from the perspective of the defendants and their supporters.

The four -- Tsimafey Dranchuk, Mikalay Astreyka, Enira Branitskaya, and Alyaksandr Shalayka -- were charged with belonging to an unregistered organization "infringing upon the interests and rights of citizens." That's a far cry from the accusations made by authorities when the four were originally arrested. Then, state officials suggested that the activists were plotting to overthrow the state and launch terrorist attacks in Minsk. On August 2, prosecutors recommended the accused be given sentences of two to three years. In the end, Astreyka received a sentence of two years. Dranchuk was sentenced to one year, and Branitskaya and Shalayka each received six-month sentences. The time they have already served means that at least Branitskaya and Shalayka are due to be released soon.



Tsimafey Dranchuk

Information about the trial has been scant, with the public denied access and little press coverage. Since their detention in February, relatives of the accused have complained that their visiting rights have been restricted. Volha Antsyovich, the wife of defendant Tsimafey Dranchuk, gave birth to a baby son while her husband was in prison. "I think our children will grow up to become very good people," she said. "Our son, while growing up, will know and remember that when he was born, his father was not able to give me flowers or write me a note and give it to the maternity hospital. "Even if this regime will not change by the time Platon [their son] becomes an adult, this regime has already made a staunch opponent [out of him] at the time of his birth," she added. The wives of both Astreyka and Shalayka are currently pregnant as well.

The defendants have argued that their NGO, Partnership, was only interested in election monitoring. Opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich, who lost by a wide

margin to Lukashenka in the March presidential election, has spoken out in support of the defendants. "They [the authorities] have already begun to fight people who did nothing but had an intention to do something. What did these people want to do? They wanted to monitor the [presidential] election and they wanted to do an exit poll. This is done in all countries, even in those that are not very civilized," Milinkevich said on July 28. "The authorities are afraid because they know that they lie and they know that the elections were falsified. They are afraid of the truth. Therefore, it is a struggle against the truth," he added.

Ambassadors of several European Union countries have also criticized the trial -- in particular, the fact that it is being held behind closed doors. German Ambassador Martin Hecker, speaking outside the courtroom on July 31, compared the proceedings to the show trials that took place during the Nazi and Stalin eras. He also decried the fact that the work of independent election-monitoring groups is considered illegal in Belarus. And the British ambassador to Belarus, Brian Bennett, said the trial is a worrying development. "We're here to show that we are keeping an eye on the process and to show our support for the democratic process in general," he added. "But also to show the authorities that we are concerned about developments here."

The activists were arrested in accordance with amendments to the country's Criminal Code. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka signed off on the amendments in December 2005. The changes make it a crime punishable by up to two years in jail to "discredit" Belarus in the eyes of foreign organizations and governments. People convicted of circulating "false information" about the country also face similar prison terms under the new law. The United States and European Union have both spoken out against the amendments. (RFE/RL Newsroom, with contributions from RFE/RL's Belarus Service)

Source: RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine & Moldova Report, Aug.

HISTORICAL DATES

August 9, 1910

Birthdate of the Belarusian poetess **Larysa Hieniyush**, in the town of Zelva.



Larysa Hieniyush

September 27, 1605

Anniversary of the **Battle of Kirchholm**, when the troops of the Republic of Two Nations (Grand Duchy of Litva and Poland), under the leadership of hetman Jan Karol Chadkievic defeated the numerically superior Swedish army.

Will Writers Bow To Government?

By Jan Maksymiuk

The Union of Belarusian Writers (SPB) was evicted from its headquarters in Minsk on August 30 because of a dispute over unpaid rent with the presidential administration. The eviction is widely seen as a premeditated measure by Belarusian authorities to limit and marginalize the public significance of an organization still perceived as a rare model of intellectual independence in a country controlled by an authoritarian regime. The SPB was first ordered to vacate its headquarters at the House of Writers last week, but was given a brief respite when the presidential administration postponed the eviction until August 30.

Until nine years ago, the House of Writers — a three-story building in downtown Minsk — belonged entirely to the SPB, an organization founded in 1934. But in 1997, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka issued a decree handing control of the property to his administration's property management department. From that point on, building space began to be rented out to various organizations and commercial firms. The property managers made clear they also expected the SPB to begin paying rent. The union refused, saying its writers' royalties had contributed to constructing the building in the first place. So when the union's lease agreement on the House of Writers expired in January 2003, the presidential administration declined to renew it. Union members, however, refused to leave. Thus began a court dispute that ended earlier this year with a court ordering the SPB to vacate the premises and pay the president's office more than \$20,000 in compensation for lingering past the expiration of its lease.

Belarusian writer and SPB member Volha Ipatava initially proposed that the union make a public appeal to raise the required sum. "When they who owe us many millions for our house demand \$23,000 from us, I think that we need to collect this sum," Ipatava said. "And we will collect it. We should remain in the House of Writers, because it's a really sacred place for us — in contrast to them. They're going to make some kind of entertainment structure out of it."

Opposition leader and former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich also suggested that the SPB should try to raise money in order to keep its office. "There are two options. First, to fight to the end for one's own honor and the truth — because it is unjust to pay this money — and to find oneself on the street," Milinkevich said. "To do so would mean to lose this remarkable house. The second option is to begin paying, even if the verdict is unjust. In this case, we would preserve the most spiritual thing that we have. I am in favor of the second option. The world is not without good people, both in Belarus and abroad, and we all are able to stand together and to show that it is not so easy to break us."

In the end, however, a special council of SPB members gathered at the House of Writers for a final time on August 30. They decided to forgo any further negotiations

on their eviction, and to vacate their historic headquarters. The decision was a disappointing milestone in the union's struggle with Lukashenka, which began shortly after his presidential inauguration in 1994. Belarusian writers welcomed en masse official plans to revive the Belarusian language after the former Soviet republic gained independence in 1991. SPB members wrote mostly in Belarusian, and were delighted at the thought of a language revival.

Three years later, they were no doubt shocked to hear their first president declare that such efforts were of no value. It's a statement that's become notorious among supporters of the Belarusian language: "The people who speak the Belarusian language cannot do anything else apart from speaking the Belarusian language, because it is impossible to express anything great in Belarusian," Lukashenka declared in December 1994. "Belarusian is a poor language," he added, before delivering his final verdict. "There are only two great languages in the world -- Russian and English." A referendum in 1995 gave Russian official status in Belarus, along with Belarusian.

In practice, the decision meant that Belarusian was once again relegated to secondary status, deprived of any real opportunity to achieve widespread public use. At the same time, the government began to gradually limit its subsidies to publishing houses and authors producing texts in Belarusian. In 2001, the government ceased to finance the SPB altogether. State-controlled media began to portray the writers union as a nationalistic organization hostile to the president's policies.

In 2002, the government attempted to take control of the SPB. A group of writers, at the apparent behest of the government, tried to replace the SPB leadership with a more compliant group that could provide a sort of intellectual support for the ruling regime. But the SPB that year managed to elect one of its own to serve as its chairman -- 30-year-old novelist Ales Pashkevich. Pashkevich refused to bow to the will of the authorities -- an uncompromising stance that apparently recently cost him his job at Belarusian State University.



Ales Pashkevich

In 2005, the government tried a new tactic, creating an alternative group to the SPB -- the almost identically named Union of Writers of Belarus. Its chairman, Mikalay Charhinets, is both a lawmaker and a Russian-language novelist. He has done little to conceal that his organization is ideologically driven and in full support of Lukashenka's program of re-Sovietization and re-Russification. "I was brought up in a Russian-speaking environment," Charhinets has admitted in interviews. "I have never considered myself Belarusian."

The current eviction of the SPB from its headquarters appears to be just another official measure to quash political dissent among the intellectual elite in Belarus. Many people in Minsk told RFE/RL's Belarus Service they were appalled by the forced eviction: "I have no words for that.

It's an absurdity. Most likely there is no other country in the world where such things happen," said one Belarusian woman. "Writers everywhere are highly esteemed and respected. Here, meanwhile, we watch as our pride is trampled down in the dirt." Another interlocutor was no less categorical. "Seizing the building by the presidential administration is an act of dictatorial violence," she said. "It is a step into nothingness." Such opinions, however, are unlikely to carry much weight with the current Belarusian authorities.

There is little that Belarusians can do to support their uncompromising writers, other than to continue buying and reading their books. Reluctance to publish in Belarusian has led to a significant drop-off in the number of Belarusian-language publications. But the situation is not yet hopeless. Private publishing companies have filled the gap, printing four-fifths of the 500 Belarusian-language books printed in Belarus in the first half of 2006.

Source: RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine & Moldova Report, Sept. 1, 2006

HISTORICAL DATES

August 5, 1506

Anniversary of the **Battle of Kletsak**, when the military force of the Grand Duchy of Litva, led by hetman Mikhal Hlinski, defeated a numerically superior Crimean Tatar army.

August 6, 1517

Francis Skaryna of Polatsak printed the first book in Belarusian, the Bible, in Prague.

August 14, 1385

The dynastic Union of **Kreva** was signed between the Grand Duchy of Litva and the Kingdom of Poland, its purpose being a common defense against the aggression of the German Teutonic Order. Under the terms of this treaty Grand Duke Jahajla married the Polish princess Jadwiga, and became the king of Poland. The dynastic union thus created a federation (commonwealth) of Two Nations.

September 2-29, 1621

Anniversary of the **Battle of Chocin**, when the 70,000 strong united army of the Republic of Two Nations (Grand Duchy of Litva and Poland), under the leadership of Litva's top hetman Jan Karol Chadkievic defeated the Turk-Tatar forces of 220,000 men.

September 8, 1514

Anniversary of the **Battle of Vorsha**, when a military force of about 30,000 men, led by hetman Konstantin Astroski of the Grand Duchy of Litva defeated a Muscovite army of cca. 80,000 men near the town of Vorsha.



Hetman Astroski

Since 1991 this date has been celebrated as the **Day of Belarusian Military Glory**.

As Drinking Increases, Government Declares War

By **Valentinas Mite**

Drinking has become such a problem in Belarus that it is threatening the very existence of the nation.

That, at least, is the view of sociologist Mikhail Zaleski, who specializes in the problems of alcohol abuse. He says that official statistics show that it has become one of the main causes of early death.

As a result, Belarus is toughening its fight against alcoholism. The Interior Ministry has prepared a draft presidential decree aimed at reducing alcohol consumption.

The new measures target public drinking and introduces new penalties for selling beer to minors. There are also new restrictions on advertising alcoholic drinks, including beer.

Life expectancy for Belarusian males has fallen to 63 years, and for females to 75. In neighboring Poland, the equivalent figures are 70 years for males and 79 years for females. Belarus also has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe.

"If you make a statistical model and remove the factor of alcohol abuse, the average life expectancy of Belarusian men increases by seven years," Zaleski says.

Zaleski says that at the beginning of the 20th century five people in 100,000 committed suicide, but that the number has now reached 60 and is growing. He says sociologists and medics agree that the main reason is alcohol abuse.

After the collapse of communism, many Eastern Europeans changed their drinking habits and moved from strong drinks to wine and beer, says Alyaksandr Sasnou, deputy director of Socioeconomic and Political Studies, a Belarusian think tank.

But this hasn't happened in Belarus, where beer drinking has also become more widespread, but the amount of spirits consumed has not fallen significantly.

"People drink beer and it is sold almost everywhere," Sasnou says. "This was not the case in Soviet times. There are inebriated people everywhere. You cannot say they are drunk, insofar as they are not lying under a fence, but there are a lot of people under the influence."

It's no longer unusual to see young people sitting on benches drinking beer or strolling the streets with beer bottles in their hands. Beer is often mixed with vodka. There's even a popular saying: "Beer without vodka is a waste of money." Sasnou says alcohol-induced "happiness" is cheaper than it was during Soviet times. "We have calculated [the price of alcohol] in relation to the average salary," he says. "You can now buy more spirits for an average salary than during the Soviet period." "People drink anything containing alcohol," Zaleski says. "They buy it and drink it on the spot. This is the modern culture of drinking. Shops selling alcohol work around the clock. It's the same with places selling empty bottles or waste paper. People steal to buy alcohol and then they drink it on the

spot. I see this everyday."

The government's planned restrictions are already being compared with the antialcohol campaign launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union 1985. Sasnou says Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka may suffer the same consequences as Gorbachev, who lost the war against alcohol and a considerable portion of his popularity.

A big chunk of state revenues comes from alcohol, and the state cannot afford to lose them. There is also a risk that the measures will stimulate the production of illegal alcohol, as happened under Gorbachev.

Dealing with advertising could be even more difficult as most of it appears on Russian commercial television channels, which are widely available in Belarus.

"The biggest share of beer advertising comes from [Russia]," Zaleski says. "It has flooded the market. Teenagers, in their enthusiasm and stupidity, are snared by this advertising and can't be separated from their giant 1.5-liter bottles of beer. The brands of beer on offer are cheap and strong."

Sasnou says Lukashenka's government is "fundamentally unable to fight drinking," as the current authoritarian system provides no alternatives for people.

In addition, in authoritarian Belarus, civil society is under pressure, and people are not given much help to deal with the problems of alcoholism.

Alcoholics Anonymous, an international organization that helps people stop drinking, was banned in the Soviet Union and is not very visible in present-day Belarus either. "Probably, they are very anonymous," Zaleski says. "The problem is that in our country people know nothing about this organization. You don't see them and cannot hear them." Alcoholic Anonymous Belarus has only a post-office box on its website, with no telephone number and no address.

Source: RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine & Moldova Report, Aug. 1, 2006.

HISTORICAL DATES

November 2 - Remembrance Day (Dziady)

The day for commemorating ancestors with a special family meal, dating from pre-Christian times and later associated with Christianity's All Souls' Day.

Since the Belarusian Declaration of Sovereignty in July, 1990, **Dziady** became an occasion for patriotic demonstrations emphasizing the victims and heroes of the historical past. Such observances were led by the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and other groups and included marches to **Kurapaty**, a site near Minsk where mass executions took place during the Stalinist era.

November 1830 through 1831

The national liberation uprising against the Russian empire and for the renewal of the *Rečypaspalitaja* (Republic) of Two Nations (Poland and Litva)

Minsk not Seen as Popular Travel Destination

(Compiled by Jan Maksymiuk)

More often than not, Belarus makes the headlines for its political repression, rather than as an attractive travel destination. According to official statistics, 36,000 foreign tourists came to Belarus in the first quarter of 2006. Most of them came from neighboring Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states. Most popular is Minsk, Belarus's capital, which attracted some 26,000 tourists in that period. The number is very small when compared to Belarus's neighbors. Last year, some 3.5 million tourists visited Latvia and more than 2 million came to Lithuania.

The head of Latvia's State Tourism Agency, Valdis Vitalns, says Belarus invests too little money in tourist infrastructure and creates too many bureaucratic hassles for potential visitors. Many Belarusians seem to agree. One young man, who declined to give his name, tells RFE/RL's Belarus Service in Minsk: "We have no infrastructure. You come to Mir [a medieval castle near Minsk] and, I am sorry to say, there is no toilet there. Why should people come here?"

A young woman says the authorities should allocate more money for advertising. She says that since foreigners know very little about Belarusian history and culture, they have no desire to visit the country. "We simply need more promotion," she says. "We need to promote such places of interest such as the Mir Castle. Then I think we will have more tourists."

Belarusian officials say they are trying to fix the situation. Viktor Yankovenka, chief tourism expert at the Ministry of Sport and Tourism in Minsk, told the Belarusian news agency Belapan that officials want tourists to feel more comfortable in Belarus. Yankovenka said that starting in the fall, new information points will appear in Minsk, informing visitors of city highlights. He said that in the next few years, Belarus will have new motels, camping grounds, cafes, and parking lots. He also announced that travel agencies that fail to attract tourists will be closed.

Others from Minsk say that the environment keeps foreigners away. Belarus was heavily affected by the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident. "The main reason [why tourists are not coming] is the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant," one young man says. "People are not coming here because they are afraid of radiation."

But perhaps the problem lies deeper. A young woman from Minsk, who also declines to give her name, says the problem is Belarus's general image, which is seen as undemocratic in the West. "They [tourists] do not like our regime," she says. Western countries have denounced as fraudulent Belarus' March 19 presidential election, in which Alyaksandr Lukashenka was reelected. The authorities have been widely accused of violating human rights and restricting political freedoms. Meanwhile, the number of Belarusians traveling abroad is decreasing. In the first quarter of this year, some 224,000 Belarusians went abroad, 10,000 less than in the first quarter of 2005.

Source: RFE/RL's Newsroom, based on material from RFE/RL's Belarus Service, Sept. 1, 2006.

Italian Town Rallies Around Family Over Orphan

By Jeffrey Donovan

For thousands of visitors each summer, the picturesque Italian town of Cogoleto, on the coast near Genoa, is a slice of paradise. There's a long sandy beach, a sea perfect for swimming, and a festive atmosphere that first made the area popular with stars such as Sophia Loren in the 1950s.

But now, Cogoleto is making headlines for different reasons: as the center of a struggle over the fate of a Belarusian orphan that has sparked a row between Rome and Minsk, with possible major consequences for tens of thousands of Belarusian children who come to Italy each summer to recover from the lingering effects of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl.

Italians are never ones to hide their feelings, and this week in Cogoleto, there has been an outpouring of emotion in support of the 10-year-old Belarusian orphan and her local foster parents. About two weeks ago, the couple, Maria Grazia Bornacin and Alessandro Giusti, hid the girl to prevent her return home after Italian doctors said she had been repeatedly abused at her orphanage northwest of Minsk.

"On [September 19], there was a candle-lit vigil," Cogoleto Deputy Mayor Anita Venturi said. "More than 1,000 people marched through the center of town, in complete silence and with signs on which were posted the United Nations rights oirl's life. But they are now under investigation for 'removal of a minor' — a crime, however, that falls short of full kidnapping in Italy and does not include arrest.

Alyaksey Skrypko, the Belarusian ambassador to Italy, told reporters on September 20 in Genoa that Minsk would be forced to take "both bilateral and international measures" against Italy should the girl, who has been given the pseudonym "Maria," not be returned (Ed.- The girl's real name is Vika Maroz). Italian and Belarusian media reports say those measures could include holding up around 600 pending Italian applications to adopt Belarusian kids, and also at least partly halting a program that sends nearly 30,000 children to Italy each year on "therapeutic stays" for victims of the lingering effects of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

Those threats are grave, says Venturi, who nonetheless has thrown her weight behind keeping 10-year-old Maria in Italy. "The consequences are clearly very serious," she says. "Among other things, it's pitting children against other children, and that's very grave." The Chernobyl program is what first brought Maria to Cogoleto in 2003. Her foster parents says they first noticed bruising and signs of abuse on Maria in 2004 and alerted doctors. But this year, after the girl tried to drown herself in the sea, apparently out of dread at returning home, her foster parents took dramatic measures.

They put her in hiding after the Juvenile Court of Genoa ruled that she must be repatriated, following assurances from Minsk that Maria would be given proper care. Luigi Massoletti, who runs a local hotel, agrees it was a dramatic

move. He also says Belarus appears to be in the right, with regard to international law. Yet, Massoletti says he and most of Cogoleto support the foster parents out of concern for Maria's physical well-being. "We understand the position of the [foster] parents, who know that with everything that's happened, they won't see the girl again if she returns home," he says. "The whole town is with the family."

He adds that many people in town believe Belarusian authorities have acted too rashly by immediately threatening to block the Chernobyl program and adoptions. "They should let it play out a bit longer first and then think about that later, but not put it on this level already," he says. "Because they are putting all the other families against this young couple who are defending the girl. That's why a lot of Italians are saying now, 'Think about it before taking any further steps.' That is, both the foster parents and Belarus, because it's the kids who will be punished by not being able to come here anymore."

Maria's young foster parents reportedly put in a request to adopt her three years ago. But they have been quoted in the Italian press as saying that they would not mind if another Italian family adopted her, provided she receives adequate medical and psychological care in Italy. Danilo Grillo, Cogoleto's parish priest, tells RFE/RL that Maria's physical well-being is the main concern of all the townspeople. "We strongly hope that this little girl can receive care in Italy, and that she can have what every girl or woman who has been molested needs: that is, the warmth of loved-ones, the love of a family," Grillo says. But Grillo, like many others in Cogoleto, is concerned that the case will negatively impact the other Belarusian children who come to Italy. He urges the Belarusian authorities not to use the children in retaliation. "I'm hoping for a good resolution both for Maria and the other 30,000 kids," Grillo says. "Our parish hosts other [Belarusian] children. Our parish is making arrangements to host five or six or 10 kids during the summer. That is, we are completely willing to cooperate. Our interest is not sentimental; it is concern for the life of this girl."

Italian media reports say Belarusian Ambassador Skrypko is due to meet in Rome today with Foreign Ministry officials in a bid to find a solution. Reports say many in the Italian government would like to resolve the issue in a way that would send the girl back to Belarus to receive the proper care.

But some Italian jurists and politicians have come out in favor of keeping Maria in Italy, noting that the country, as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is obligated to take its own steps to protect the girl's well-being. (Bohdan Andrusyshyn of RFE/RL's Belarus Service contributed to this report.)

Source: RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine & Moldova Report, September 26, 2006.

Editor's note: On September 30 Italian authorities have returned Vika to Belarus. She will remain under supervision of Belarusian and Italian medics and psychologists until her full readjustment to life in Belarus.



Vika Maroz



The source of items in the NEWS BRIEFS section is the RFE/RL Newsline, unless otherwise indicated.

1. REPRESSIONS

June 30, 2006

ANOTHER BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST GOES TO SERVE 'RESTRICTED-FREEDOM' TERM.

Opposition youth activist Artur Finkevich left Minsk on June 29 for Mahilyou, where penitentiary authorities are to determine where he will serve his "restricted-freedom" term, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. In May, Finkevich was sentenced to two years of enforced labor for spraying antipresidential graffiti on walls in the Belarusian capital. "Restricted-freedom" punishment, known in post-Soviet prison slang as "khimiya," means that a convict has to live in a sort of prison barracks, work for a specified enterprise or organization in a designated area, and report to the barracks administration at an appointed time every day. Three other Belarusian oppositionists are currently serving "restricted-freedom" terms: Mikola Statkevich, Pavel Sevyarynets, and Andrey Klimau.

July 13, 2006

BELARUSIAN JUDGE EXPELS FORMER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE FROM COURT

The Minsk District Court expelled on July 12 former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin from the courtroom thus reportedly depriving him of the chance to make a final statement, Belapan reported. The expulsion took place during the examination of journalist Lyubou Luneva, a witness for Kazulin's defense team. Kazulin is charged with disorderly conduct and malicious hooliganism. The accused attempted to ask the journalist several questions, but the presiding judge Alyaksey Rybakou did not allow it. Prosecutor Syarhey Bortnik requested that Rybakou expel the defendant and the judge upheld it. According to Kazulin's lawyer Ihar Rynkevich, his client will be allowed back into the courtroom only to hear the verdict.

July 28, 2006

BELARUSIAN ACTIVIST FINED FOR STAGING UNAUTHORIZED DEMONSTRATION.

An opposition activist in Vitsyebsk was fined on July 29 for participating in an unauthorized demonstration to mark Belarus's former Independence Day on July 27, Belapan reported. Alena Zaleskaya, leader of local United Civic Party branch, was ordered to pay a fine of 620,000 rubles (\$290). Two others charged along with Zaleskaya were found guilty of violating Article 167 of the Administrative Offenses Code, but were given warnings. All three were detained by police after distributing flyers and newspapers promoting the former holiday during the rally.

August 4, 2006

BELARUSIAN COURT JAILS FOUR ELECTION ACTIVISTS.

A district court in Minsk on August 4 found four election activists guilty of running an unregistered organization "infringing upon the interests and rights of citizens" and sentenced them to

jail terms ranging from six months to two years, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. In a trial held behind closed doors, Judge Leanid Yasinovich punished Mikalay Astreyka with two years in jail, Tsimafey Dranchuk with one year, and Enira Branitskaya and Alyaksandr Shalayka with six months each. As the four were kept in custody since February 21, Branitskaya and Shalayka are due to be released later this month. "[The authorities] have already begun to fight people who did nothing but had an intention to do something. What did these people want to do? They wanted to monitor the [presidential] election and they wanted to do an exit poll. This is done in all countries, even in those that are not very civilized," Belarusian opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich commented on the trial. "As we have done in the past, we will take steps to impose appropriate sanctions on those responsible for abusing the rights of these Belarusian citizens," U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said after the trial. "The politically motivated trial continues a disturbing pattern by the authorities to intimidate civil society activists and to further erode the democratic process in Belarus," McCormack added.

Aug. 22, 2006

BELARUSIAN COURT OUTLAWS INDEPENDENT THINK TANK.

Belarus's Supreme Court has liquidated the Belarusian Thought Factories (BFM), an independent think tank founded in 1997, which initially united 18 independent research centers, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on August 21. The court suspended the think tank on January 24 after a suit by the Justice Ministry, which said that the BFM did not have a registered legal address at an office building. According to BFM Coordinating Council Chairman Aleh Manayeu, the court's requirement that an organization may not have its legal address at a private apartment runs counter to the constitution.

Aug. 23, 2006

ETHNIC POLISH ACTIVIST IN BELARUS JAILED FOR 10 DAYS.

A district court in Hrodna on August 22 sentenced Andrzej Poczobut -- an activist of the Union of Poles in Belarus, which is not recognized by the Belarusian authorities -- to 10 days in jail, finding him guilty of petty hooliganism, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Reporters of the local television in Hrodna accused Poczobut of preventing them from filming a wreath-laying ceremony at a local cemetery, which was organized on August 18 by the SPB. Poczobut and one of his colleagues were detained during that ceremony, after which the Polish Foreign Ministry issued a note of protest.

Aug. 31, 2006

BELARUSIAN WRITERS EVICTED FROM HEAD-QUARTERS.

The Union of Belarusian Writers (SPB) was evicted from the House of Writers, its longtime headquarters in downtown Minsk, on August 30, RFE/RL's Belarus Service and Belapan reported. The Minsk City Economic Court ruled in March that the SPB has occupied premises in the House of Writers illegally since January 2003 (see End Note below and "RFE/RL Newsline," August 25, 2006). The SPB is expected to hold a congress in Minsk in October. SPB Chairman Ales Pashkevich told journalists that measures to recover the headquarters will top the agenda of the congress. "It will be symbolic if Belarusian poets, prose writers, and dramatists adopt an appeal to the Belarusian people and the

international public, including their European colleagues and CIS authors, calling for moral and financial support for the union," Pashkevich added.

Sept. 22, 2006

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST SENT TO CORRECTIONAL FACILITY TO SERVE TERM.

Former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin was transferred on September 21 to a correctional facility in the village of Vitsba in Vitsebsk Oblast to serve his prison term of 5 1/2 years, Belapan reported. Kazulin's wife told journalists that relatives are allowed to visit the prisoner once every two weeks. Kazulin, the rector of Belarusian State University in Minsk in 1996-2003, was found guilty of hooliganism and the organization of group actions disturbing the public peace in the wake of the March 19 presidential election, in which he challenged incumbent President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. His appeal against the sentence was rejected earlier this week.

Sept. 22, 2006

BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT SUSPENDS INDEPENDENT MAGAZINE.

The Information Ministry has suspended the Belarusian-language monthly magazine "Arche" for three months, Belapan reported on September 21. The ministry accuses the magazine of publishing articles about politics in violation of its license. "Arche," founded in 1997, is a high-profile intellectual publication, featuring essays on history, culture, and literature as well as original prose and poetry. With a monthly print run not exceeding 1,000 copies, it is distributed by volunteers because it was banished from the state-monopolized subscription and retail networks. "The ministry's move dramatically demonstrates the Belarusian authorities' paranoid desire to fight not only the opposition but also all otherwise-minded people," "Arche" Editor in Chief Valer Bulhakau commented on the ban.

2. POLITICAL OPPOSITION

July 7, 2006

FORMER BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE PLEADS NOT GUILTY TO CHARGES.

The trial of former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin began in the Maskouski District Court in Minsk on July 6, Belapan reported the same day. Kazulin reportedly pleaded not guilty to charges of disorderly conduct and malicious hooliganism. "All that is going on here is political revenge and an organized provocation," said Kazulin, the chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada). The presiding judge rejected all motions by the defense. During the afternoon session, the accused expressed no confidence in the court and once again demanded that the judge and the public prosecutor be replaced. The demand was rejected.

July 18, 2006

BELARUSIAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS URGE EU, U.S. TO BLACKLIST KAZULIN'S JUDGE, PROSECUTOR.

Belarusian human rights defenders have urged the European Union and the United States to impose a travel ban on Alyaksey Rybakou, the Minsk District Court judge who recently sentenced former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin to 5 1/2 years in prison, Belapan reported on July 17. Human rights activists also demanded a travel ban for public prosecutor Syarhey Bortnik. "Judge Alyaksey Rybakou was apparently interested in the out-

come of the trial, he executed someone's evil will and fulfilled the task assigned to him," Belapan quoted Ales Byalyatski, chairman of the Human Rights Center "Vyasna," as saying. "Rybakou failed to take steps to establish the truth in the case, as well as steps to prevent actions dishonoring Kazulin," Byalyatski added.

Aug. 15, 2006

BELARUSIAN PARTY CALLS FOR BOYCOTT OF LOCAL ELECTIONS.

The opposition right-wing Conservative Christian Party (KKhP) called for boycotting next year's elections for local soviets, warning that the Belarusian and Russian governments might use the vote to hold a referendum on a constitution of the Belarus-Russia Union State, Belapan reported on August 14. "On election day one should not go to the polls to vote for the regime but should rather take to the streets to join others for protests and actions," the KKhP said in a statement, adding that "no fair election could be held under the occupational regime and dictatorship." The KKhP boycotted the 2004 parliamentary elections and this year's presidential vote.

Aug. 16, 2006

BELARUSIAN ELECTION MONITORS APPEAL AGAINST THEIR CONVICTIONS.

The defense teams of Mikalay Astreyka and Tsimafey Dranchuk have filed appeals with the Minsk City Court against prison sentences handed down to them earlier this month, Belapan reported on August 15. In a trial held behind closed doors, Judge Leanid Yasinovich punished Mikalay Astreyka with two years in jail, Tsimafey Dranchuk with one year, and Enira Branitskaya and Alyaksandr Shalayka with six months each for running an unregistered election-monitoring organization that allegedly "infringed upon the interests and rights of citizens." The Minsk City Court has two months to consider the appeals. Since the four were arrested in February, Branitskaya and Shalayka are to be released next week. Amnesty International declared the four prisoners of conscience.

Aug. 18, 2006

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION CHALLENGES PRESIDENTIAL POLLS IN COURT.

Nearly 6,000 people signed a complaint against the official outcome of the March 19 presidential election in Belarus, which has been recently filed with the Supreme Court by the Belarusian opposition, Belapan reported on August 18. "We demand a fresh election," independent trade unionist Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, who coordinated the signature collection campaign, told the agency. Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Alyaksandr Kazulin, two opposition candidates who ran against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, appealed to the Supreme Court to invalidate the incumbent's victory shortly after the vote. The request was rejected on the ground that regulations currently in force ban contesting the Central Election Commission's decisions. According to the official results, Lukashenka on March 19 won 83 percent of the vote, while Milinkevich and Kazulin were supported by 6.1 percent and 2.2 percent of voters, respectively.

Aug. 29, 2006

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER WARNS AGAINST POTENTIAL PLEBISCITE ON MERGER WITH RUSSIA.

Former presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich said at a meeting with European diplomats in Minsk on August 29 that the Belarusian opposition will organize protests if Minsk and

Moscow move ahead with their reported plans to hold a referendum on the establishment of a unified state, Belapan reported. "In the context of the government's total information monopoly, most Belarusians will not be able to get full information about the referendum's real dangers and the threat of loss of independence and sovereignty by Belarus," Milinkevich said. "Today there are no real opportunities for the public to control preparations for and the process of voting, as well as vote count. Under these circumstances, the planned referendum will become a grave political event that may lead to the disappearance of Belarus from the political map of the world," he added. A Russian newspaper alleged earlier this month that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka during a meeting on August 19 with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, agreed to hold a referendum in November or December on the formation of a Russia-Belarus Union State.

Sept. 5, 2006

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION PARTY PROPOSES 'BLOC FOR INDEPENDENCE'

The opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) on September 4 resolved to hold a gathering of opposition politicians, activists of nongovernmental organizations, leaders of cultural associations, prominent public figures, and intellectuals in October in order to form an alliance that could be named the Bloc for Independence, Belapan reported. "The coalition of pro-democratic forces currently experiences a crisis and discord, that is why the forum and the new bloc would allow us to determine a common view of the political situation and find ways out of the crisis," BPF Deputy Chairman Alyaksey Yanukevich said. The opposition Belarusian Party of Communists and Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) have recently floated the idea of forming a center-left bloc. "Talks about coalitions and so-called blocs make my head go round," United Civic Party (AHP) leader Anatol Lyabedzka said of the initiatives. "The most important thing is that everybody should be acting within one common strategy. The AHP is not going to join any blocs. We would like to cooperate with both left-wing and right-wing groups."

Sept. 13, 2006

BELARUSIAN COURT REJECTS COMPLAINT AGAINST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS

The Supreme Court has refused to consider a petition filed last month by nearly 6,000 people demanding the nonrecognition of the official results of the March 19 presidential election (see "RFE/RL Newsline," August 21, 2006), Belapan reported on September 12. According to Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, an independent trade union leader who headed a group that sent the petition, the court explained its decision by saying that the matter does not fall within its jurisdiction. "I must admit there was little hope that the court would consider our complaint. We did this in order to have an opportunity to appeal to international organizations. A petition to the UN Human Rights Council will be the next link in this chain," Bukhvostau said.

Sept. 18, 2006

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER CALLS FOR STREET PROTESTS.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich said at a rally of some 1,500 people in Minsk on September 16 that he does not believe that future elections in Belarus will offer people a real political choice, Reuters and Belapan reported. "The opposition no longer believes

in elections in Belarus. We must hold street protests. We have to have more and more of them. Only in this way can we overturn dictatorship," Milinkevich said. The rally, which was connected to a rock concert to demonstrate solidarity with political prisoners in Belarus, was authorized by the authorities but ended ahead of the planned time because of a sudden electricity cutoff. Milinkevich called on participants in the rally to gather later at a central square to place candles in memory of opponents of the ruling regime who disappeared without explanation. Some 100 primarily young people reportedly gathered at October Square later the same day but were immediately turned away by police. An unconfirmed number of demonstrators were detained and are reportedly to be tried on September 18.

Sept. 25, 2006

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION PARTY CREATES YOUTH WING.

Young activists of the opposition Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) held a conference in Minsk on September 24, where they set up a youth wing of the party under the name of the BNF Youth, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. The conference, attended by 68 delegates, elected lawyer Ales Kalita as head of the BNF Youth.

Sept. 25, 2006

ROUNDTABLE MULLS FOREIGN BROADCASTING TO BELARUS.

Leaders of Belarusian opposition parties and nongovernmental organization as well as representatives of the European Union and electronic media outlets broadcasting from Germany, Poland, and Lithuania to Belarus, held a roundtable in Vilnius on September 23 to discuss the prospects for the organization of foreign broadcasting to Belarus, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. "Participants agreed that electronic media, especially satellite television and radio stations, are now major means to deliver truth to people in Belarus," Pavel Sheremet of Russia's Channel One told Belapan. Poland is now working to launch a satellite television channel broadcasting to Belarus next year.

3. REGIME ACTIONS and STATEMENTS

July 11, 2006

BELARUSIAN POLICE SEEK DAMAGES FROM FORMER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE.

Officers of a special unit have demanded 13 million rubles (\$6,046) in damages from Alyaksandr Kazulin, whose case is under consideration at the Minsk district court, Belapan reported on July 10. Officers who testified on July 7 and July 10 said that they were seriously injured during a March 25 demonstration, which ended in clashes between protesters and police. Another officer, who detained Kazulin on February 17 in the National Press Center, claimed 2 million rubles in damages. Kazulin, who is charged with disorderly conduct and malicious hooliganism, reiterated his demand for the replacement of the public prosecutor, whom he accused of conniving with the officers.

July 2, 2006

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT SIGNS ANTICORRUPTION BILL.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has signed into law an anticorruption bill passed by the legislature earlier this summer, Belapan reported on July 26. The bill extends the list of those who can be prosecuted for corruption by adding foreign citizens, presidential candidates, members of the upper parliamentary

house and local soviets who are employed by a company or organization, as well as health-care employees and university professors. The bill bans government officials from opening and keeping accounts with foreign banks and fulfilling orders coming from political parties and nongovernmental organizations. The bill also requires officials and their family members to file annual income and property statements and to notify the tax authorities about the sale or purchase of property valued above \$29,000. The law will come into force six months after its official publication.

Aug. 25, 2006

GOVERNMENT TO REVISE BELARUSIAN ORTHOGRAPHY.

Education Minister Alyaksandr Radzkou told Belapan on August 25 that his ministry is currently working to update the Belarusian language's spelling and punctuation rules. Radzkou said he discussed this issue with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka earlier the same day. Lukashenka reportedly gave the Education Ministry two weeks to submit a revised version of the Belarusian orthography. "The point is that the existing rules were enacted as far back as 1957. For this reason, as well for the reason that the rules are being understood differently, the president believes that there is an urgent need for modern, clear spelling rules," Radzkou noted.

Aug. 31, 2006

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT WANTS TO DISCIPLINE BAD PARENTS.

Alyaksandr Lukashenka said at a government conference on August 30 that careless parents should fully compensate the state for the maintenance of their children, Belapan reported. "If neglectful parents cannot raise healthy descendants, drink heavily, and lead an immoral life, the state must take the children from such families and take care of them," Lukashenka said. "But such parents, if they can be called so, would be held fully responsible. They should fully compensate for the expenses on the maintenance of their children, until the last kopeck is recovered," he added. According to the Belarusian president, if such neglectful parents do not manage to earn the necessary \$120 per month for the maintenance of a child, they should be forced to do so and even assigned to forced labor. "Send them [bad parents] to collective farms, to construction sites, to menial work, regardless of their profession and education. Let them work 24 hours per day, seven day per week, 360 days per year," Lukashenka told his ministers.

Sept. 5, 2006

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT OBJECTS TO PAYING MORE FOR RUSSIAN GAS THAN GERMANY

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka told journalists in Pinsk, southern Belarus, on September 1 that Belarus will not buy Russian natural gas at a price higher than that Russia charges Germany, Belapan reported. "Russia is selling crude oil to us at a higher price than to Ukraine and has offered a gas price higher than for Germany," Lukashenka said. "We will never buy gas at a higher price than Germany. People [in Belarus] who stayed in the same trenches with Russians [during World War II] have not died yet." According to Lukashenka, Belarus has received offers to develop oil fields in other countries, including Venezuela. "If we carry out this project, we will sell oil there and earn money," he added. In May, Gazprom suggested that Belarus would have to pay \$200 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas in 2007, up from the

current \$46.68. Belarusian economic expert Yaraslau Ramanchuk told "Novye izvestia" on September 4 that Lukashenka will be forced to accept a gas price of \$135-\$150 per 1,000 cubic meters in 2007.

Sept. 13, 2006

LITERATURE IN BELARUS SAID TO BE 'STATE BUSINESS'

Anatol Aurutsin, deputy chairman of the Union of Writers of Belarus (SPB), an organization established in 2005 and widely believed to be politically loyal to the government, said on September 12 that financial support from the state makes literature "a state business," Belapan reported. President Lukashenka recently issued a decree allocating state subsidies for the SPB. On the other hand, the Union of Belarusian Writers, which is portrayed by state-run media as hostile to Lukashenka, was evicted from its longtime office in Minsk last month (see "RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova Report," September 1, 2006). Aurutsin told Belapan that the SPB has some 300 members, of whom "roughly 60-65 percent" write in Belarusian, and the remainder in Russian.

Sept. 12, 2006

BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT TO SUBSIDIZE LOYALIST WRITERS

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has decreed that the government allocate funds in next year's budget to finance the Union of Writers of Belarus (SPB), Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on September 11. The SPB, founded in 2005, is seen as an alternative to the Union of Belarusian Writers, which government-controlled media outlets have branded as nationalistic and being in opposition to the president's policies. The Union of Belarusian Writers, founded in 1934, was evicted from its longtime office in downtown Minsk on August 30, following a court dispute with the presidential administration over unpaid rent. Lukashenka's decree orders the government to provide money for a dozen SPB functionaries and for the SPB's "statutory activities," including those connected with business-trip travel and accommodation, utility bills, communications services, equipment purchases, and the promotion of literature.

Sept. 18, 2006

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT WANTS NONALIGNED COUNTRIES TO FORM 'GLOBAL CENTER.'

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on September 15 called on the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) to become an "independent global center of political force," Belapan reported. Lukashenka was speaking at a summit of the NAM in Havana. "This moment has come now. It may be too late tomorrow. We should by no means allow ourselves to be removed one by one to the backyards of our planet or torn to pieces like Yugoslavia and other states and drawn into the shade so that nobody will ever see us," Lukashenka said. He also called on members of the NAM to coordinate their stance on issues discussed by the United Nations. "Together we are able to prevent [the United Nations] from being used as a tool in crackdowns on countries that implement an independent policy," Lukashenka noted.

4. ECONOMY

July 21, 2006

BELARUSIAN GAS OPERATOR SIGNS PROTOCOL WITH GAZPROM.

Belarusian gas-pipeline operator Beltranshaz and the Russian gas giant Gazprom on July 20 signed a protocol of intent to co-operate on the appraisal of Beltranshaz's assets, Belapan reported the same day. The protocol was inked by Beltranshaz General Director Dzmitry Kazakou and Gazprom Deputy Chairman Aleksandr Ryazanov. The protocol is expected to be approved by the Belarusian government "within one or two weeks," said Andrey Zhukau, an aide in the Belarusian Energy Ministry, and "the Dutch Bank ABNAMRO will then get down to the appraisal [of Beltranshaz]." Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka announced earlier this month that the Belarusian government is ready to sell a controlling stake in Beltranshaz to Gazprom before the end of this year. In return, Belarus will insist that Gazprom honor its promise to sell Belarus gas at a price equal to the domestic rate in Russia's Smolensk Oblast. Gazprom has threatened to raise the price Belarus pays for gas from \$46.68 to \$200 per 1,000 cubic meters in 2007.

July 26, 2006

SOME 700,000 BELARUSIANS SAID TO BE 'ECONOMICALLY INACTIVE.'

Belarusian Deputy Labor Minister Valery Paulau said in Minsk on July 25 that some 600,000-700,000 people of working age in Belarus are "economically inactive," Belapan reported. Another ministry official explained that people are deemed economically inactive if they do not have jobs but are not considered to be unemployed. This category includes students, prisoners, those on parental leave, and people who are not registered with any institution. As of July 1, the number of officially registered unemployed people in Belarus, which has a population of about 10 million, was 66,500.

July 27, 2006

BELARUSIANS DYING OF ALCOHOL POISONING AT AN ALARMING RATE

More than 1,500 people have died in Belarus this year of alcohol poisoning after drinking counterfeit products, Belapan reported on July 26, quoting the Belarusian Interior Ministry. The number of deaths from alcohol poisoning last year in Belarus was 3,300. "If you...remove the factor of alcohol abuse, the average life expectancy of Belarusian men increases by seven years," Belarusian sociologist Mikhail Zaleski told RFE/RL in a recent interview. Life expectancy for Belarusian men stands now at 63 years, and for women at 75.

Aug. 10, 2006

MINSK-BASED COMPANIES INVEST MORE THAN \$100 MILLION IN LOSING FARMS.

Minsk-based enterprises invested 250 billion rubles (\$116 million) in the agricultural sector in the past two years, Belapan reported on August 9, quoting Alyaksandr Lukashevich from the Minsk City Executive Committee. The investments followed the government's directive of 2004 allowing well-performing urban enterprises, including private ones, to take control of unprofitable collective farms. Lukashevich said a total of 140 loss-making farms in Minsk Oblast received aid from urban enterprises in the period.

Aug. 14, 2006

BELARUS OPENS IRANIAN CAR PLANT.

Belarus's and Iran's industry ministers -- Anatol Rusetski and Ali Reza Tahmasebi, respectively -- inaugurated an assembly plant for Iran's Samand cars outside Minsk on August 11, Belapan reported. Dzmitry Yahorau, director general of Unison, the Belarusian partner in the project, said the plant will for the time being assemble the Samand LX model equipped with a 1.8-liter, 100-horsepower Peugeot engine. The car will cost around \$12,500. According to Yahorau, the plant is expected to manufacture up to 800-820 vehicles by the end of 2006, and its output is projected to rise to 6,000 the following year. Unison hopes to export Samand cars to Central and East European countries, the Baltic states, Russia, Ukraine, and also sell them in Belarus.

Aug. 23, 2006

BELARUS EXPECTS TO START GAS TALKS WITH RUSSIA IN OCTOBER.

Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Vasil Dalhalyou told journalists on August 22 that negotiations on Russia's gas price for Belarus in 2007 will start no earlier than October or November, Belapan reported. Belarus currently pays \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters of Russian gas. Russian media signaled earlier this year that Gazprom may increase the gas price for Belarus in 2007, even up to as much as \$200 per 1,000 cubic meters. Belapan quoted Gazprom deputy chief Aleksandr Ryazanov as saying in a recent interview that Gazprom could accept Belarus's "petrochemical assets" as payment for gas in the future. "In any case, we should have a market price for gas, although we could accept petrochemical assets as part of payments so that Belarus would be able to bring its economy within the next two or three years to a level enabling it to pay those market prices," Ryazanov said. "We have an interest in Beltranshaz [Belarus's gas pipeline network] and low-pressure lines of Belpaliuhaz [fuel and gas distribution organization]. We could consider the possibility of acquiring petrochemical assets, including the Mazyr oil refinery, in which we have a 42 percent stake via Slavneft."

Sept. 7, 2006

WORLD BANK SAYS BELARUS IMPOSES HIGHEST TAXES ON BUSINESS

The World Bank on September 6 released its annual survey of 175 countries pertaining to ease of doing business. The report appraises 10 specific areas of business regulations, such as the ease of registering a business, paying taxes, and cross-border trade. According to the report, Belarus is the worst country in the world in the category "paying taxes," which addresses the taxes a medium-sized company would have to pay in a given year. According to the report, businesses in Belarus have to pay 186.1 percent of their profits and make 125 tax payments a year in order to comply with tax regulations. Former Belarusian businessman Leu Marholin told RFE/RL's Belarus Service that he agrees with the World Bank's evaluation. "If entrepreneurs in Belarus worked honestly, they would simply cease to exist. They still exist today because they take the personal risk of cheating the state," Marholin noted. Meanwhile, Alyaksandr Zhyhulich from the Belarusian Tax and Duties Ministry cast doubt on the World Bank's assessment of Belarus's tax system. "It cannot be seen from this report what they consider to be tax payments and from where they took this number -- 125 [tax payments a year].... I think there is a biased approach there. I don't know how they calculated this. We

don't have any such statistical data [confirming that businesses must pay] 186 percent of their profits," Zhyhulich told RFE/RL. Overall, Belarus received a ranking of 129 in terms of ease of doing business.

Sept. 19, 2006

MINSK SIGNALS INTENTION TO BUILD NUCLEAR POWER PLANT.

National Academy of Sciences Chairman Mikhail Myasnikov told journalists in Minsk on September 18 that Belarus may begin the construction of a nuclear power plant in 2008, Belapan reported. Myasnikov explained that before starting the construction, Belarus needs to adopt some 15 acts and conduct research to study the geological peculiarities of the construction area. He added that experts have examined more than 40 possible construction sites and selected one but did not disclose where it is located.

Sept. 19, 2006

BELARUS REPORTS \$1 BILLION MILITARY DEAL WITH VENEZUELA.

Viktar Sheyman, state secretary of Belarus's Security Council, said in a television interview on September 17 that his visit to Venezuela on September 4-8 will bring Belarus large economic profits, Belapan reported on September 18. Sheyman revealed that the delegation he headed concluded a number of agreements on cooperation in the defense sphere, which he said were expected to result in contracts totaling more than \$1 billion. He added that dozens of Belarusian companies engaged in the defense industry will have a sufficient amount of orders for many years to come.

5. BELARUS and THE WORLD

July 26, 2006

BELARUS, VENEZUELA REPORTEDLY CREATE 'STRATEGIC ALLIANCE.'

Visiting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said in Minsk on July 25 that he and Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka have created a "strategic alliance between our countries," Reuters and Belapan reported. Chavez and Lukashenka were visiting the Military Academy in Minsk. "It is vital for us to resist any inside and outside threats in order to defend our national projects," Belapan quoted Chavez as saying. "After the Soviet Union collapsed, America made a try to open its dreadful jaw of hegemonism and imperialism over Belarus and Venezuela, declaring the victory of capitalism and free-market economy and announcing the death of socialism and the sovereignty of nations. But sovereignty and socialism will never die," Chavez added. There have been no reports on the precise nature of the Belarusian-Venezuelan alliance. The Venezuelan government news agency ABN reported that Chavez and Lukashenka signed an agreement to share military technology.

Aug. 1, 2006

LATVIA ACCUSES BELARUS OF 'PROVOCATION' OVER AIRED SEX VIDEO.

Belarusian Television on July 30 aired a video allegedly showing a Latvian diplomat in Minsk having sex with another man, Belapan reported on July 31. The host of the show "Focus Of Attention," on which the footage was aired, claimed that the purported sex act was filmed using a secret camera in the diplomat's apartment. The Latvian Foreign Ministry commented on July 31

that the video constituted "one more provocation against the Latvian state and its diplomat, and is a serious violation of the norms and practices of diplomatic law." Last week, the Latvian Foreign Ministry lodged an official protest against a recent search of the diplomat's residence by Belarusian law enforcement personnel. Belarusian Interior Minister Uladzimir Navumau said on July 28 that the diplomat was suspected of distributing pornography. Navumau added that the search resulted in the seizure of "pornographic products" from the diplomat's residence. According to Belarusian media, the incident involved Reimo Smits, second secretary of the Latvian Embassy in Minsk.

Aug. 3, 2006

LATVIA EXPELS BELARUSIAN DIPLOMAT.

The Latvian Foreign Ministry on August 2 ordered the first secretary at the Belarusian Embassy in Riga to leave the country within 24 hours, Belapan reported on August 2. According to the Latvian Foreign Ministry's website, the person "performed actions that are incompatible with the status of a diplomat," but did not specify what these actions were. The move comes amid an escalating diplomatic row with Minsk over the treatment of Reimo Smits, the second secretary of the Latvian Embassy in Belarus. On July 30, Belarusian Television aired what it claimed to be footage of Smits having sex with another man in his apartment.

Aug. 10, 2006

SWEDEN VOWS SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN BELARUS

Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson has promised that his government will continue providing support for democracy-building efforts in Belarus, Belapan reported on August 3, citing the press office of Belarusian opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich. In a letter to Milinkevich, Persson reportedly said that increased assistance will be available for nongovernmental organizations and the independent media under the European Union's European Neighborhood Partnership Instrument program that will replace the TACIS assistance program in 2007, as well as under the Swedish government's projects. The Swedish government intends to support pro-democratic activists and offer training programs for students who have been expelled from Belarusian higher educational institutions for political activity.

Aug. 11, 2006

NETHERLANDS INVITES SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS FROM BELARUSIAN STUDENTS.

Nuffic, the Netherlands' national organization for international cooperation in higher education, is launching a program that aims to help students from Belarus to take bachelor's and master's degree courses in the Netherlands, Belapan reported on August 10. The Dutch Education Ministry has made 1 million euros (\$1.28 million) available for this purpose. Scholarships will cover a monthly allowance of 900 euros, tuition fees, visa fees, and travel expenses. There is no fixed number of available scholarships. In 2006 the scholarship program will be open exclusively to students from Belarus.

Aug. 23, 2006

NEARLY 400 BELARUSIAN STUDENTS TO STUDY ABROAD FOR POLITICAL REASONS.

Alla Karol, a member of the Committee for Support of Political Victims, told Belapan on August 22 that as many as 393 stu-

dents who have either been expelled from higher educational institutions in Belarus or face expulsion for political reasons, have applied to the committee for assistance. Karol added that more than 380 Belarusian students are to start this new academic year in neighboring or EU countries, including 233 in Poland, 77 in Ukraine, and 25 in the Czech Republic. The Committee for Support of Political Victims, which was set up by opposition leader Alyaksandr Milinkevich's team this spring, aims to provide assistance to people who suffered from political persecution during and after Belarus's presidential election in 2006.

Sept. 8, 2006

BELARUS, IRAN VOW TO BOOST COOPERATION

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said in Minsk on September 7 that Iran and Belarus will "definitely" improve their cooperation, Belapan reported. According to Mottaki, Iran intends to increase its annual trade with Belarus from the current \$500 million to \$1 billion. Mottaki met in Minsk with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau, and Chamber of Representatives head Uladzimir Kanaplyou. Lukashenka noted that Belarus and Iran "do not fully use the potential of the solid legal basis for bilateral cooperation" and "have huge reserves to invigorate ties." The Belarusian president also noted that Iran is "a serious point of support" for Belarus in "the far abroad." Meanwhile, Martynau assured Mottaki that Minsk supports Tehran's nuclear program, which has sparked international controversy. "Belarus believes that any nuclear country that adheres to the agreement on nuclear nonproliferation is fully entitled to pursue nuclear activities," said Martynau.



First Center For Belarusian Studies in the United States

By David Swartz

On July 11, 2006, Southwestern College announced the establishment of the Center for Belarusian Studies at the college's main campus in Winfield, Kansas. The Center is the first in the United States devoted exclusively to the academic study of Belarus and Belarusians. The Center is a joint endeavor between the College and The European Humanities University Foundation, Inc., the latter terminating its activities with the creation of the new entity.

Establishment of the Center followed a lengthy process of research and consultations the United States, Belarus, and elsewhere - both by the College and by the EHU Foundation. This effort resulted in the conclusion that a significant gap exists in academia in the United States with regard to perhaps the least well-known, but no less significant, member of the East Slavic branch of the Slavic group of nations, languages, and cultures (the other two being Ukraine and Russia). It also concluded that the academic study of Belarus would suffer through incorporation into broader Slavonic studies programs at larger U.S. institutions of higher education.

The fundamental mission of the Center is to promote and facilitate the revival of the Belarus nation through higher education. Revival of the Belarus nation includes

developing a better knowledge of Belarus — its history; culture; language; literature; economic, social and political structures; etc.— in the United States. Thus, the Center envisages developing a broad palate of academic initiatives, including but not limited to: exchanges of scholars and students; research; publishing scholarly works; offering courses in the Belarusian language, history, culture, and related topics; and holding seminars on topical subjects, such as ethnography, trade, and tourism. The College also anticipates hosting Belarusian performing arts groups, organizing exhibitions, and developing public awareness about Belarus in the United States.

The Center extends its desire to cooperate with relevant, carefully selected institutions and organizations in pursuit of its mission. Many of these, it is hoped, will be in Belarus itself, where establishment of the Center has already been widely publicized via a number of media outlets. Current realities in Belarus necessitate caution in evaluating potential cooperative partners, but Center personnel are encouraged both by the breadth and depth of interest expressed from there in the few short weeks since the Center's creation was publicly announced.

Outside of Belarus, the most obvious partner for collaborative work with the Center would be the Vilnius-based European Humanities University-International, which was forcibly closed in Minsk in 2004. Additionally, the Center will seek cooperation with relevant institutions in other countries where scholarly research on Belarus is also taking place.

A formal opening ceremony for the Center is planned for later this autumn in Winfield. Details will be announced as they become available. In the meantime, Southwestern's Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. J. Andrew Sheppard, and the EHU Foundation's president, Ambassador David H. Swartz, are serving as co-Executive Directors of the Center. Swartz served as first U.S. ambassador to the newly-independent Republic of Belarus, beginning in 1992. Dr. Paula Survilla, Associate Professor of Music/Ethnomusicology at Wartburg College in Iowa — the leading scholar in the United States on contemporary Belarusian culture — has graciously agreed to serve as Associate Executive Director of the Center. A board of directors broadly representative of the Belarusian diaspora in the United States, academia, and the public and private sectors is currently being assembled and will be announced in due course.

Southwestern College is a highly regarded private liberal arts institution. Established in 1885 by the then-Methodist Episcopal Church, Southwestern retains its close association with the United Methodist Church. It prides itself on graduating students of high integrity and deep commitment to public service and societal improvement. In addition to a wide variety of undergraduate majors leading to B.A. and B.S. degrees, the college also offers an MBA degree program at its campuses in Wichita and Oklahoma City, as well as Master of Education and Master of Science in Leadership programs at its Winfield campus.

Southwestern's mission statement stresses the College's commitment to leadership through service in a world with-

out boundaries. International programs have been high on the College's agenda for years, and each year it enrolls students from many countries in its degree programs. With the advent of the high-tech era, Southwestern routinely conducts real-time courses via the Internet with students around the world. Its Belarus outreach began several years ago with a book donation program for the benefit of the European Humanities University in Minsk. Two students from Belarus have graduated from the college and, as noted below, Southwestern has cooperated with the EHU Foundation on academic exchanges.

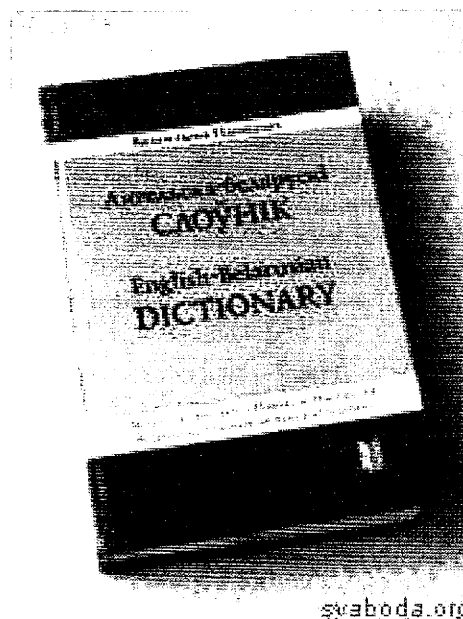
The European Humanities University Foundation, Inc., established in 1996 by newly retired Ambassador Swartz and several colleagues, provided support to the university of the same name in Belarus. When EHU in Minsk was forced to close in 2004 the Foundation terminated its support activities. In 2005, the Foundation began a cooperative program with Southwestern to bring to the United States Belarusian academics formerly associated with EHU. The first of these, Dr. Alyaksandr Lahviniec, was in residence at Southwestern's Winfield campus in 2005.

David Swartz was the first US ambassador to Belarus. He was instrumental in helping to establish the European Humanities University in Minsk.

English-Belarusian Dictionary Published in Minsk

In August 2006, after decades of preparation, a comprehensive English-Belarusian Dictionary has been published in Minsk. The dictionary has over 30,000 entries. The Belarusian language parts of the Dictionary use the classical orthography, while the English portions use the American variant of the English language.

The dictionary is the result of the efforts of many people. The project was begun in the 1950s by a Belarusian teacher who had emigrated to Canada - Valentina Pashkevich -- who began to collect materials for the Dictionary. Realizing that the project had become too overwhelming for one person, she turned over her extensive research and card collection to the Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York. Thereafter, an Editorial Board of more than 15 Belarusian-Americans, Belarusians and Americans took over the project of editing the dictionary letter-by-letter. Zora Kipel headed the Editorial Board until her death in 2003, and then Dr. Jan Zaprudnik took over; George Stankevich was responsible for the initial computer input of all of the entries. The final lexicographic editing was done by Siarhei Shupa. The Dictionary was published in Belarus by Zmitser Kolas.



svaboda.org

Belarusians Abroad

Convention of Belarusians Of North America

The 27th Biennial Convention took place in New Brunswick, New Jersey over the Labor Day weekend. It was hosted by the New Jersey Branch of the Belarusian-American Association (BAZA) under the leadership of Branch President George Azarko.

The Symposium titled "In Defense of Democracy in Belarus" was a major event of the Convention. It consisted of the following discussion groups: "A Tribute to the Victims of the Regime," - moderated by Alice Kipel and George Azarko, "The Role of Belarusians in North America in Providing Assistance to Democratic Opposition in Belarus," - moderated by Vital Zajka and Walter Stankievich, "An Analysis of the Outcome of the 2006 Presidential Election" - moderated by Zianon Pazniak and Alesia Siomukha. The Symposium's conclusions were incorporated into the Convention resolution. Voice of America TV correspondent Alex Campbell was on hand to cover the proceedings and to interview some of the key participants.

The next day's Banquet and Concert formed the festive event of the Convention. After personal greetings by George Azarko and BAZA President Anton Shukieloyts, written greetings were read from New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine, Congressman Chris Smith, who is the author of the Belarus Democracy Act, and the local Congressman Frank Pallone. The keynote speeches were delivered by Ivonka Survilla, the BNR Rada President, and by Zianon Pazniak, the Chairman of the Conservative Christian Party of BPF.

A surprise of the day was produced by Dr. Vitaut Kipel by introducing the long awaited English-Belarusian Dictionary. He was joined by two other major collaborators - Dr Jan Zaprudnik, and the key linguist of the project - Siarhiej Shupa, who personally brought few dictionaries

directly from the printers in Minsk. This monumental undertaking was fully funded by contributions from the worldwide Belarusian diaspora.

The Family Kazak Trio provided the evening's entertainment as well as the concert which consisted of both patriotic and folk numbers. The popular bard Siarzhuk Sokalau-Vojush added to the concert's variety. On display, beside the usual collection of books, tapes, CDs and paintings, was a newly created bust of Vasil Bykau, the Belarusian writer nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature who passed on three years ago. He was commonly referred to as "The Conscience of the Nation". The sculptor Ales Shaternik is now in US, and a search is on for a suitable public site for Bykau's bust.

Scholarly Conference in Prague

A scholarly conference, entitled "Roads to national rebirth: the Belarusian and Czech models" was held in Prague (Czech Republic), on July 4-6, 2006.

It was organized by the Charles University Department of Humanities, in cooperation with the Philosophy Department's Institute of Slavic and Eastern European Studies.

The conference's objective was to provide overall comparison and analysis of:

- processes of national and civic self-awareness in Belarus and Czech lands.
- possibilities of creating a civic society and transforming Belarus into a democratic state.

The project has been financed from the Czech Republic's budget within the framework of the Czech Foreign Ministry's Division of Transformational Cooperation.

The conference featured lectures by Belarusian, Czech, German, Polish and Lithuanian scholars and academicians, actively engaged in analyzing problems of the Belarusian national rebirth in historic and linguistic concepts. Their cooperation is designed to secure an international exchange of experiences in the given field, and would initiate launching an open scholarly discussion.

The main significance of the conference both for Belarus and the Czech Republic was in providing the opportunity to analyze and compare historical experiences of the two countries, as well as to compare the two opposite types of nation-formation:

- formation of the Czech nation, as an example of a successful national movement that began comparatively early and managed to generate a wide popular acceptance, and
- the Belarusian model of national movement, that remains unfinished and is on the opposite pole of the historic process of nation-forming. (**Editor's note:** this definition of the Belarusian national movement has been supplied by the institutions that organized the conference; however, it is really difficult to accept such a simplified view without considering the effect of differing historical circumstances).

The **historical** section of the conference featured lectures by Czech, Polish, German and Lithuanian scholars, as well as the following contributions by Belarusian scholars:

- Pavai Tsierashkovich, PhD (Belarusian State University, Minsk) on: Belarusians in the context of the national rebirth of Central- and Eastern European nations.
- Prof. Jauhien Miranovich, PhD. (University of Bialystok, Poland), on: The development conditions of the Belarusian and Czech national movements in the beginning of the 20th century.
- Prof. Aliaksandr Smalianchuk, DrSc. (University of Laws, Hrodna, Belarus), on: The Belarusian movement and the "Polish question" in the beginning of the 20th century.
- Aleh Latyshonak, PhD. (University of Bialystok, Poland), on: From the history of the Grand Duchy of Litva to history of Belarus. Formation of the Belarusian national historiography.
- Hienadz Sahanovich. PhD. (European Humanities University, Minsk/Vilnius), on: The historical falsification and the national movement in Belarus in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

The **economic-political** section featured lectures by Czech and German scholars, as well as the following contributions by Belarusian scholars:

- Prof. Zakhar Shybieka, DrSc. (Belarusian State Economic University, Minsk), on: The Belarusian national-communism: the danger of de-nationalization, or the only possibility of self-determination?
- Andrey Kishtymau, PhD. (University of Parliamentarism and Enterprise, Minsk), on: Influence of modernization processes on the development of the Belarusian national movement in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.
- Vital Skalaban, PhD. (Belarusian National Archive, Minsk), on: Metamorphoses of the Belarusian national idea in the years 1939-1956.

The **linguistic** section featured lectures by Czech and German scholars, as well as the following contributions by Belarusian scholars:

- Siarhiej Zaprudski, PhD. (Belarusian State University, Minsk), on: The linguistic purism as a component of national rebirth - the Belarusian and Czech examples.
- Iryna Bahdanovich, PhD. (Belarusian State University, Minsk), on: The ideas of national rebirth in the Belarusian and Czech poetry of the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.
- Yazez Yanushkevich, PhD. (Belarusian Academy of Sciences, Kupala's Literature Institute, Minsk) on: "Czechs - a noble and nationally aware nation..." Vatslau Lastouski and the Czech national rebirth.
- Mikhas Skobla (Belarusian Writers' Union) on: "In the Czech lands I met freedom and democracy": Larysa Hieniyush and ideals of Czech independence.

Editor's comment: The very initiative of the Czech Foreign Ministry (its division of Transformational Cooperation) is worthy of praise.

It had, however, one major unfortunate flaw: the ministry unwittingly missed the political opportunity to provide a real support to the transformation process in Belarus:

Since most of the conference's lecturers and many of invited guests were Belarusians, the **politically reasonable and correct** approach would have been to make the Belarusian language one of the conference's working languages. The organizers should have secured the services of interpreters from Belarusian into Czech or English, possibly from RFE/RL or from the People in Need Foundation. It would also been helpful to have printed the Belarusian texts translated into Czech and/or English.

Instead, the conference's organizers resorted to an easy way out — by making Russian practically the only working language, ostensibly since the Belarusian lecturers and most of Czech students do know Russian.

Thus, on the second day of the event, I managed to witness somewhat absurd proceedings — when Belarusians in the audience addressed Belarusian lecturers in Russian, who in turn, responded in Russian.

Panel Discussions in Prague

Two public panel discussions, dealing with the latest political situation in Belarus, took place in Prague on Sept. 21.

Both of them were staged by the Prague-based Association for International Affairs (AMO). The first discussion, held in cooperation with Stefan Batory Foundation of Warsaw, Poland, and with the support of Open Society Fund, Prague.

It was entitled "Belarus and the EU after the Presidential Elections" and consisted of two panels:

Situation after presidential elections and EU realtions towards Belarus — current stage and perspectives for coming months, with following participants:

- Grzegorz Gromadzki, Stefan Batory Foundaion,
- Lubos Vesely, Director of Research Centre, AMO.
- Andrus Klikunou, Member of the International Committee of the BNF Party, Belarus.
- Tomas Szunyog, Director of Department of South-eastern and Eastern Europe with the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The second panel dealt with the topic of **Support for pro-democracy structures and main problems in its implementation**. The participants were:

- Agnieszka Komorowska, Stefan Batory Foundaion,
- Pawel Kazanecki, Eastern European Democratic Centre in Poland.
- Alena Makouskaja, Chairwoman of the World Association of Belarusians "Backauscyna" (Homeland),
- Marek Toman, Transformation Cooperation Unit, Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Within the discussion the policy paper **Belarus and the EU after the Presidential Elections** was presented.

Another panel discussion, entitled **Potential and Specifics of Cooperation with Belarusian Democratic Non-**

Governmental Organizations, was held on the same day, by AMO and the association Civic Belarus.

Its main participants were:

- Siarhiej Mackievic, representing the Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democratic NGOS, and
- Ondrej Soukup of the Belarusian Centre with the People in Need Foundation.

The simultaneous translation from Belarusian to Czech and English was available in both panel discussions.

Expelled Students to Study Abroad

The Czech Republic is about to fulfill its promise to help educate young Belarusian students, now persecuted by the regime for their opposition activities.

Many participants of the recent post-election protests have been dismissed or are threatened with dismissal from Belarusian universities.

Twenty separate projects have just been selected to implement the program. According to the Czech Foreign Ministry representative, Ms. Gabriela Dlouha, it will affect cca. 300 Belarusian students at the cost of roughly \$900,00.

In addition to providing scholarships in the classical humanities fields, such as in international relations, European studies, law, journalism or foreign languages, a special Foreign Ministry commission also selected projects designed to help the development of civic society in Belarus.

Thus, Masaryk University in Brno will organize a special winter course for preparation young leaders in Belarus, J.E. Purkyne University will concentrate on education for democracy, and the organization "Transitions On Line" came up with a project to help set up independent information media.

Source: Mlada Fronta Dnes (Prague), May 2006

Nuclear Plant Referendum?

The decision to build a nuclear plant in Belarus should be adopted at a referendum. This opinion was voiced by a deputy chairperson of the standing committee on Chernobyl disaster aftermaths, ecology and environmental management of the "chamber of representatives" Maryja Khudaya at the session of a round table on the use of natural resources on September 26.

She noted that Belarus' power industry is ageing, and nuclear power is thought to be the cheapest, BelaPAN reports.

Source: Charter 97 Press Center, Sept. 27, 2006.

MEDIA WATCH

BOOK PREVIEW

Andrej Kotljarchuk:

In the Shadows of Poland and Russia: The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Sweden in the European Crisis of the mid-17th century.

BR Editor's introductory comments:

The full official name of this state was *the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Ruthenia and Samogitia*, using the Latin names for the lands that largely formed this state between the Baltic and the Black Seas. In this book it appears in three variants: most frequently in the abbreviated form — the GDL, also as the Duchy, or simply as Lithuania. All of these have historical meanings and do not refer to the smaller territory of the present-day Republic of Lithuania.

The term *Samogitia* referred to the western part of this territory, inhabited by Baltic-speaking people. The very term is derived from the Baltic word *Zemaičiai* (Lowlands, analogous to *Netherlands*).

The region immediately east of Samogitia was inhabited mostly by another Baltic ethnic group known as the *Aukštaitiai*, living in *Aukštota* (Highlands). The nucleus of the later multinational Grand Duchy (GDL) originated here, in the mixed Lithuanian-Ruthenian region of *Navahradak*, at the present time a small city in western Belarus.

Gradually, as the GDL grew in size and power, the term *Litva* and *Litviny*, (in Latin *Lithuanians*) began to denote all its citizens. Until the beginning of the 20th century it was widely applied primarily to ethnic Belarusians by their eastern and southern neighbors - Russians and Ukrainians. In the 16th and 17th centuries a considerable percentage of Belarusians' ancestors, most of all Roman Catholics and Protestants also preferred to call themselves *Litviny*.

The term *Ruthenia* and the *Ruthenian* (Old Belarusian) language) was applied to Slavic-speaking peoples of the GDL: the ancestors of today's Belarusians for most of the GDL's history, and inhabitants of northern Ukraine before this region was ceded to Poland. The term appears in the 17th century and earlier Western sources, where the term *Muscovites* (or the citizens of *Muscovy*), denoted ethnic Russians. The use of the Ruthenian language in the state and local documentation of the GDL reflected the predominance of the Ruthenian-speaking population.

The federated state of the Grand Duchy and Poland is referred to in the book as the *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, or simply the *Commonwealth*.

The author analyzes the formation of the union between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Sweden, signed on October 20, 1655 at Kedainiai (located in the central part of present-day Lithuania) and the political crisis that followed.

The formation of this union was a result of strong separatist tendencies among the Ruthenian Protestant elite of the GDL, led by the Radziwill family; and if successfully implemented, it would have radically changed the balance of power in the Baltic Sea region.

The Union's main legal aim was the termination of GDL's federation with Poland and the establishment of a federation with Sweden. The GDL aspired to return to international stage as a self-governing subject; the Union meant a new, Scandinavian, alternative to the growing Polish domination, as well as to the threatening Russian domination.

The author places the events in the GDL in the context of the general crisis that occurred in Europe in the middle of the 17th century, characterized by a great number of wars, rebellions and civil wars stretching from Portugal to Ukraine, and which provided the background to the crisis that affected GDL and Sweden. The research for the book uncovered the importance of the role of the lesser powers in changing the geopolitical balance between the Great Powers.



Andrej Kotljarchuk

The failure of the Union with Sweden was caused by both internal and external factors. Internally, various ethnic, confessional and political groupings within the nobility of the GDL were split into the supporters of different foreign powers, ranging from Muscovy to Transylvania.

The external cause for the failure of the Union project was the flawed Swedish strategy.

Sweden focused its aggressive attention on Poland, instead of stabilizing its newly established union with GDL. Having formed the Union, Swedish authorities treated the Grand Duchy as an invaded country, not as an equal. The Swedish administration introduced heavy taxation and was unable to control the brutalities of its army. As a result Sweden was defeated in both the GDL and in Poland.

Among the different economic, political and religious explanations for the general crisis, the case of the GDL shows the importance of political conflicts. For the GDL separatists the main motive for turning against Poland and promoting alliances with Sweden, Russia or the Cosacks was the inability of Poland to adequately defend the Grand Duchy from a Russian invasion.

However, the cost of being a part of Sweden or Muscovy was greater than the benefit of their political protection. Therefore, the pro-Polish orientation prevailed. After Poland recovered its military strength after 1658, the GDL nobility regrouped around Warsaw. The GDL managed to remain on the political map of Europe, but at price of general religious Catholicization and cultural Polonization.

In the Introduction, the author states:

"We are living in a time when historical interest in union projects in Europe has grown considerably. After the recent enlargement of EU in 2004, the western parts of the historical GDL, i.e. today's Lithuania, eastern Poland and southern Latvia joined EU member Sweden in a common political, juridical and cultural space. At the same time, the eastern parts of the former GDL, namely Belarus and Ukraine, for various reasons found themselves outside of this process. Nevertheless, the post-1991 historical studies in Belarus and Ukraine, are seeking ways to recover 'the European consciousness' within the post-Soviet society."

... Signing of the Union influenced international relations in 17th century Europe by changing the existing geopolitical balance. Sweden considerably expanded its Great Power position by adding the GDL territories to its Eastern Baltic provinces of Karelia, Ingermanland, Estonia, Livonia and Pomerania.

Editor's note: The prevalent historical interpretation of the Union as an insignificant episode with no important consequences was created by Polish historians. They interpreted the formation of the Sweden-GDL Union as just a betrayal by the GDL of the national interests of the Polish-dominated Commonwealth.

The Sweden-GDL Union remains an important part of the historical consciousness of present-day Lithuania and Belarus. For them, the treaty was supportive of their right to independence and statehood at the turn of the last century.

Dr. Kotljarchuk's thesis analyzes the Sweden-GDL Union by revealing its political, economic and religious preconditions and repercussions. The author presents valuable archival material and acknowledges the contributions of earlier historians. He examines the role of the GDL in the eastern foreign policy of Sweden and in changes in the geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe in the middle of the 17th century.

He reveals the tradition of close political, economic and religious relationships that joined the political elites of the GDL and Sweden - an issue that present-day historians fail to touch upon. He describes the conditions in GDL in the first half of the 17th century, the growth of GDL separatism and its effect on the Poland-GDL Commonwealth. The role of GDL in the eastern geopolitics of Sweden in the 1650s is also outlined.

The reasons for the failure of the Union are described. The geographical analysis of the political and religious adherence of the Union signers proves that the Radziwills' Protestant political faction was key in concluding the alliance with Sweden. A systematic investigation of the situation in the Swedish-controlled zone of the Grand Duchy presents some new material, as does a sustained effort to explain Russia's role in the later anti-Swedish uprising.

The orientations of different political factions are examined, as are those of the ethnic and religious groups within the GDL elite towards the neighboring powers that eventually laid claim to its land.

The book concludes by describing the postwar crisis in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the decline of Protestantism there, and the postwar identity of the GDL nobility. It analyzes the case of GDL as part of the overall European Crisis, and the post-Crisis situations in Sweden and in the Grand Duchy.

Two informative maps are appended to the text:

- "The Swedish military operations and zones of control in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania 1655-1657."
- "The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its administrative, geographical and religious divisions, 1654-1667." In Dr. Kotljarchuk's view, this is the first high-quality map of the Grand Duchy to reach the English-speaking reader. Both maps have been produced with the assistance of Dr. Victor Temushev of the History Institute of the Belarusian State University.

The previewed book contains the academic dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History at Stockholm University, publicly defended by Andrej Kotljarchuk on June 10, 2006 in MB 505, Södertörns högskola.

BOOK REVIEW

Active and Cohesive Tomorrow's EU Policy towards Belarus

ISBN 83-89406-57-8

ISBN 80-9034688-2-0

This 50-page booklet has been published in January 2006 within the project European Choice for Belarus — by the Stefan Batory Foundation in Warsaw in cooperation with the Association for International Affairs in Prague. It has been prepared by Mesrs. Grzegorz Gromadzki and Lubos Vesely.

Some of the book's contents have been presented in more detail during the panel discussion "Support for pro-democracy structures and main problems in its implementation," held on September 21, 2006 in Prague (Refer to the article Panel Discussions in Prague, on p. 28)

The book also supplies pointers to following related articles that recently appeared on Web sites:

- *EU Democracy Assistance to Belarus: How to make Small Improvements Larger and More Sustematic?* - by Pontis Foundation/Institute for Civic Diplomacy, on <http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/en/11030>
- *Effective Policy towards Belarus - a Challenge for the enlarged EU*, Stefan Batory Foundation, Warsaw & Association for International Affairs, Prague, April 2005, by Grzegorz Gromadzki, Vitali Silitski, Lubos Vesely, on <http://www.batory.org.pl/english/intl/pub.htm#belarus>.
- *Changing Belarus*, edited by Dov Lynch, Chaillot Paper 85, The European Union Institute for Security Studies, on <http://www.iss-eu.org/chaillot/chai85e/html>.
- *The EU needs a Policy on Belarus*, by Urban Ahlin, CER Bulletin, issue 45, December 2005/January 2006, on http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/45_ahlin.html.

Russian Central Electoral Commission Acknowledges Voting Fraud in Belarus.

Head of the Russian Central Electoral Commission Alexander Veshnyakov commented the proposed amendments to the Russian electoral code, made several statements that ... he should not have made, given the official policy of Kremlin towards Belarus. He suggested that the law should not "stretch to the borders of the Universe" the scope of reasons for which a candidate can be disqualified. Moreover, he denounced the idea of returning the early voting procedure (it is when people can cast absentee ballots for up to five days before elections) to the electoral law. That is what he said:

In the country where 37 percent works for the government or municipalities, [this] opens up unlimited possibilities for [using] administrative resources in order to force people to polling stations to vote ahead of time, and for falsifications, given that the ballot boxes will be de-facto unattended for four days and one can put anything in them."

Veshnyakov also said that this is what they do in Belarus.

The amendments to the Russian laws proposed by the United Russia is informative by itself. Looks like the power is stable, the economy is going strong, and there is no reason to vote against the regime for the majority of Russians. This is what the Kremlin propaganda wants the public in and outside Russia to believe. So, why to worry... Probably, because stability and tranquility is not endless, and those in power understand it clearly. So, better prepare in advance. That is what Lukashenka did in his own time. Veshnyakov may not want to be relegated to the status of Lidziya Yarmoshyna in Belarus, but it is obvious that Russia is moving, at the will of the Kremlin and its cronies, in a clearly "Belarusian" way more and more...

Source: Transitions On Line Blogs, Aug. 31, 2006

PRESS REVIEW

Poland calls on Belarus to end reprisals of Polish activists (*Radio Polonia*, August 30, 2006) – Poland has called on Belarus to end reprisals directed against the Association of Poles, whose 20 thousand members represent the 400, 000 Poles living in Belarus. In a statement, the Foreign Ministry demanded the immediate release of three of the organization's activists who were detained a day before a meeting of the Association's Board. In addition, other senior members of the organization had been questioned by Belarusian security services. The Polish statement says that these actions are intended to intimidate the Association.

Iran, Belarus cement cooperation with agreements (*Islamic Republic News Agency*, August 13, 2006) – During his recent visit to Belarus, Minister of Industries and Mines Alireza Tahmasbi signed four cooperation agreements with Belarus state officials.

Director General of the International Relations Department of the Ministry of Industries and Mines Qader Soleymani said that, according to a mutually inked agreement, Iran will build a cement factory in Belarus.

He stated, "That part of the funds for the establishment of the plant will be provided by the Belarus employer while the rest

will be provided through the credits allocated to the project by Iran's Export Development Bank as well as Industries and Mines Bank.

"A memorandum of understanding on formation of a joint industries and mines committee were also signed between the two countries to broaden their industrial cooperation," he added.

The official said that during his two-day visit to Belarus, Tahmasbi also conferred with the country's parliament speaker, deputy prime minister as well as ministers of industries and housing on matters of mutual interest.

Putin and Lukashenko Send Birthday Greetings to Fidel Castro (*MosNews*, August 14, 2006) – Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday congratulated Cuban leader Fidel Castro on his 80th birthday, praising him as one of the world's most outstanding politicians, the Kremlin said. The Russian president also wished Castro, who was forced to step aside as president two weeks ago because of illness, a speedy recovery, The Associated Press reported.

"You are well known in Russia as one of the most authoritative and outstanding political leaders today," Putin said in a telegram. He added that Russia and Communist Cuba would continue to be "active partners, with the aim of developing ties in various spheres in the interests of both our peoples and ensuring peace and stability."

Belarus' authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who shares the anti-U.S. views of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez and Castro, also sent a congratulatory message to the Cuban president. Lukashenko had warm words for Castro's efforts to resist "diktat" in world affairs — a thinly-veiled dig at alleged U.S. hegemony — saying that Belarus shared the same goal.

Amnesty International Calls for Release of Prisoners of Conscience in Belarus (*Amnesty International Press Release*, August 7, 2006) – Another four people in Belarus have been sentenced for the peaceful exercise of their human rights. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

Mikalay Astreyka, Enira Branizkaya, Alyaksandr Shalayka and Tsimafey Dranchuk, all of them in their twenties, are members of an independent election monitoring group, Initiative Partnership. They were sentenced on 4 August to between six months and two years' imprisonment for their intention to observe the presidential elections in March 2006.

"These four young people have been sentenced for the legitimate exercise of their right to freedom of association," said Heather McGill, Amnesty International's researcher on Belarus.

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about harassment, the intimidation of civil society activists, and the curtailment of the right to assembly and association. All civil society organizations face a difficult and expensive registration procedure and are often refused permission to register. Once they succeed in registering they face stringent controls and restrictions on their activities.

Venezuelan President Meets Belarus Leader (*Associated Press*, by Yuras Karmanau, July 24, 2006) – Leftist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez exchanged declarations of solidarity Monday with the authoritarian leader of isolated Belarus, who shares his anti-U.S. views. Chavez, a frequent and harsh critic of the United States, made Belarus the first stop on a major international tour that will also take him to Russia, Iran and Vietnam.

He was greeted at the presidential palace in Minsk with an honor guard, a military band and warm hugs and smiles from President Alexander Lukashenko - a man known in Europe and Washington as "Europe's last dictator."

Lukashenko, like Chavez, accuses the United States of trying to overthrow him.

"Here, I've got a new friend and together we'll form a team," Chavez said before one-on-one talks with Lukashenko. "I thank you, Alexander, for solidarity and we've come here to demonstrate our solidarity."

Lukashenko, whose regime has been slapped with Western sanctions, returned the praise, calling Chavez "a man of extensive knowledge."

"You are versed not only in the economy of Venezuela but in the Belarus economy as well, you know military science, the military-industrial complex, and this impresses me very much," he said.

"Our two nations have a lot in common, we can form a strategic alliance," Lukashenko said.

During the talks with Lukashenko, the two sides signed seven agreements on military-technical cooperation, economic and other ties as well as a declaration pledging a strategic partnership. Bilateral trade was just under \$16 million in 2005.

Chavez also was to tour the "Stalin Line" — a network of World War II defense installations outside Minsk that have restored by Lukashenko's government.

Suspicious surround Lithuanian diplomat's death in Belarus (*Baltic Times*, August 30, 2006) – The mysterious death of a Lithuanian diplomat in Belarus has sparked enormous controversy and strain in bilateral relations. Official reports from Belarus claim that security officer Vytautas Pociunas died after falling out of a hotel window, while unofficial reports in Lithuania claim the diplomat may have been stabbed or poisoned. Lithuania's politicians and prosecutors have described the ongoing investigation as "a quest of honor" and given it highest priority.

Pociunas, an adviser to the Lithuanian consulate general in Grodno, died while on a business trip to Brest in the early hours of Aug. 23. The diplomat's body was discovered next to the Hotel Inturist. The 48-year-old was believed to have fallen out of a ninth-story window.

Yet Lithuanian politicians are not ruling out the possibility of murder, suggesting that the officer might have fallen victim to Belarusian special services. An investigation by the Lithuanian Prosecutor General's Office was launched immediately. The State Security Department has also launched a probe into the circumstances in Brest, which is headed and organized by the Prosecutor General's Office.

"This is an important case, and I am keeping an eye on the performance of our prosecutors and other services. Completion of the case and having all answers is a matter of our country's good name," Prime Minister Gediminas Kirkilas told journalists after meeting with Prosecutor General Algimantas Valantinas on Aug. 25.

An editorial column in Lietuvos Rytas noted that "if we reject the version of an accident, which is very unlikely, Pociunas' death is a bloody challenge to our country. The state, just like every honest citizen, will not be able to feel safe until it is clear whom we have been challenged by."

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